

# CONFERENCE INTERPRETING: FOCUS ON RELAY

## 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the current situation on the interpreting market in Poland with special focus on the issues relating to the concept of quality. As a freelance conference interpreter and an interpreter trainer based in Cracow, I comment on the role of quality in the every-day life of a professional interpreter, as well as quality in the interpretation classroom.

The paper is divided into three parts. In part one, I start with an overview of conference interpreting training programmes and the main challenges facing interpreter trainers in Poland. In part two, I concentrate on the presentation of the general framework of the Central European conference interpreting market. Part three is devoted to the notion of quality in relay interpreting, in this section I discuss findings of a study in which interpreters were asked to give their opinion on what they value most in the performance of their pivot colleagues.

## 2. Conference interpreter training in Poland

At the beginning of the 1990s translator and interpreter training was making definitely slower progress than the booming demand for such services (Tabakowska 1996). In 1992 Tabakowska wrote:

“Translation training, which should unite within a coherent methodological framework and apply in the actual teaching practice theoretical achievements of translation studies and findings of other cognate disciplines (...), is almost non-existent” (1992: 7).

At that time there was only one institution that offered a full-fledged translation and interpreting programme for students, namely the Institute of Applied Linguistics in Warsaw.

Still currently, the most acute problem of the interpretation market is that there are few interpretation training institutions, which means that whoever feels that he knows what interpreting is about offers his services on the market and there is hardly any quality control. At present, any graduate of a language department may be registered as a sworn translator or interpreter.

The Jagiellonian University in Cracow was one of the institutions which responded to the situation on the market setting up the Postgraduate School for Translators and Interpreters in Cracow. A number of scholars throughout Poland who at the same time work as translators and interpreters set up specialised institutions for training translation and interpreting. Four leading centres (Kraków, Warszawa, Poznań and Łódź) have formed a consortium to promote quality training in Poland.

The Cracow School was launched in 1995, initially offering a joint programme for translators and interpreters. However, in 1999, its curricula were thoroughly revised and, as a result, translator and interpreter training were separated. Regular contacts established by the School with a number of the EU interpreter training institutions, as well as with the Joint Interpreting and Conference Service (JICS) and the Directorate of Interpretation in Brussels, resulted in the introduction of an interpretation curriculum based on the European Master's programme and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) guidelines for training interpreters. The issue of quality interpreting in the domestic and international market is the main concern for everyone involved in the course.

The Cracow School follows the established and widely accepted conference interpreting training paradigm that is shared by many universities and other interpreter training institutions, as well as international organizations such as the Commission of the European Union which occasionally runs in-house training courses to meet its particular needs (Mackintosh 1995). The most important AIIC criteria to test the quality of training courses are fulfilled. Applicants for courses in conference interpretation have a university degree or equivalent education and are required to pass an entrance test. The test assesses their proficiency in the languages offered, their general knowledge and cultural background. The curriculum for conference interpreting has been designed and is taught by practising conference interpreters who are at the same time well-versed in the methods of training interpretation. Training in both consecutive and simultaneous interpretation is included in the programme. The curriculum and the language combinations offered reflect the requirements of the market for conference interpretation. The requirements of the market for conference interpretation, however, mean that the course needs to address the ubiquitous problems of *retour*<sup>1</sup> and *relay*.<sup>2</sup> Coping tactics for *retour* and *relay* constitute the backbone of the curriculum (cf. Jones 1998). The findings of the questionnaire presented in part 3 as well as other international research into the subject are integrated into the course.

Interpreter trainers are aware of the need for the EU interpreters to provide a *retour* with the related issue of intensive training into a B language (Marzocchi and Zucchetto 1997). Out of 264 contact hours in the interpretation classroom, approximately the same number of hours is devoted to interpreting exercises into A and B languages. The weak point of the School, as well as all the other Polish interpretation schools and the whole interpretation market, is the absence of professional interpreters and at the same time interpretation trainers who are native speakers of other languages than Polish. As it is not likely to change in the near future, we invite native speakers who are not interpreters to deliver speeches and assess students performance. What we consider most

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<sup>1</sup> *Retour*: an interpretation where the interpreter is working into a foreign language.

<sup>2</sup> *Relay*: the use of one interpretation as a source for others, used where a meeting is multilingual and not all the interpreters understand all of the languages.

valuable, however, is our growing co-operation with foreign universities and interpretation services of the EU, which send their interpreters to Poland to assist us in our training programmes. The help of Brussels-based interpreters who spend a few months in Poland learning Polish and are keen on mutually beneficial work with our students is also invaluable.

One of the main concerns of the Polish interpretation schools is therefore the issue of training into a B language. It is reflected in the focus on proficiency in a B language which is monitored and assessed throughout the course. Master's type entrance and final exams held in accordance with the AIIC recommendations (AIIC 1991) are organised by the examining board that is made up of both tutors who taught at the course and external examiners who are practising conference interpreters and at the same time native speakers of the B languages offered by the examinees. All members of the board have the right to vote.

The scope of this paper does not allow us to go into more detail regarding the techniques used in the classroom to develop skills pertaining to the optimum performance of pivot interpreters.<sup>3</sup> An overview of those strategies might constitute the main subject of another contribution devoted to this issue.

### 3. Conference interpretation market in Central Europe

The way interpretation services are organised in Poland (as well as in other Central European countries) is still very much different from the system used outside the region. All language booths are manned with native Polish interpreters with Polish A who are expected to be able to work fluently into their respective B languages. *Retour* is therefore our every-day reality. What is more, the role of C languages is practically negligible as relay is used at all multilingual meetings. The technical aspect, i.e. the number of booths required for each conference (for instance, two booths instead of three for a conference with three working languages) and very few interpreters with A other than Polish working in the country make the whole system unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, in the light of Poland's approaching accession into the European Union, Polish interpreters working for the EU institutions will be required to provide fluent and reliable *retour*.

*Retour* interpreting in the EU institutions is at the moment restricted mainly to Finnish interpreters; its use, however, is expected to increase when the languages of the Central and Eastern European countries which have begun accession negotiations with the EU become its working languages. Relay in the European Parliament is commonly used and it is realised that

"(...) the importance of an interpreter's performance as a pivot argues for a closer look at the skills and the translational strategies an interpreter is supposed to apply when acting as a pivot" (Marzocchi and Zucchetto 1997: 75).

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<sup>3</sup> Pivot interpreters: interpreters whose interpretation is used as a source for other interpreters.

The Protocol on Enlargement attached to the recent Nice Treaty specifies the role and influence of the candidate countries when they become the EU member states. The future weighting of votes in the Council and the number of Members of the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions indicate that Poland will become one of the big six states of the enlarged EU with the role comparable to that of Spain. That means more Polish at the EU meetings and other international conferences and consequently more relay interpretation. The European Commission's Joint Interpreting and Conference Service and the European Parliament's Directorate of Interpretation have already started co-operation with Polish interpretation schools and the EU interpreters seem to be very keen on adding Polish to the list of their working languages.

In spite of recommendations to avoid a systematic use of relay, it is commonly used not only in the EU institutions, but also in the United Nations and numerous other international meetings. Interpreters and interpretation students must therefore learn how to work successfully in this mode (D. Bowen and M. Bowen 1986).

As for the situation on the Polish domestic interpretation market, some of the assignments require a very creative and flexible approach and development of new ad-hoc strategies. Let me present the example of one conference in more detail, as I have not encountered a comparable case being discussed in any sources devoted to the field. I hasten to add that I realise that the way interpretation service was organised at this meeting is very much against the AIIC principles.

The set-up of the conference was very unusual, even for Polish standards. In February 2001 in Zakopane, the winter capital of Poland, the so-called Universiade was held. The Universiade, or the Winter Students' Games, is an international sporting and cultural festival staged every two years in a different city and which, at least according to the organisers, is second in importance only to the Olympic Games. During the Universiade a two-day meeting of the FISU (International University Sports Federation) Executive Committee was held. The two official languages of the FISU are English and French. The interpretation team despatched to Zakopane consisted of four native Poles, two of them had English B, two French B. The English booth had a smattering knowledge of French, the French booth were able to follow some English. Nevertheless, the underlying idea was that relay would be used at all times. The delegates were therefore able to follow the debates either in English, French or Polish, although the only Poles present in the meeting room were the representatives of the Zakopane Organising Committee, who presented a five-minute report on the local weather conditions and then promptly left.

As none of the members of the Committee was Polish, it was very unlikely that there was anybody listening to our interpretation into Polish. This was therefore one of the rare cases when the pivot interpreters did not have to cater for the usual needs of their double audience, but could better focus on the needs of their relaying colleagues.

This led to the development of certain interesting ad-hoc strategies. I intend to describe some of them illustrating that it might be worthwhile to investigate the issue further. The example also shows how important it is to train our students in the deployment of flexible and creative interpretation strategies.

In the course of our work at the Universiade, we found out that our focus should not be so much on terminological precision and correct grammar usage in Polish as on facilitating the performance of the other booth. What started somewhat subconsciously

evolved into a consistently used technique. For instance, both English speaking and French speaking delegates when referring to the venue of the next Summer Universiade used the name Beijing. The Polish name of the city is *Pekin*, no equivalent of the name Beijing exists. The same goes for *Capetown*, which in Polish is called *Kapsztad* – undoubtedly under the influence of German. As regards names of disciplines, both booths found it easy to communicate using the English names of such disciplines as *crosscountry*, *orienteeering* or *futsal* (indoor football), which might be quite confusing for the Polish audience.

As for quality assessment at this unusual assignment, the President of the FISU Executive Committee suggested that the four of us might join them at their next meeting in Beijing.

#### 4. Quality in relay

The notion of quality, “that elusive something which everyone recognises but no one can successfully define” (AIC 1982:1), has always been regarded as one of the key issues in conference interpretation studies. As the concept of quality is situated at the interface between theory and practice (Marrone 1993), it is regarded as crucial for customers, interpreters and researchers alike. It is commonly believed that the goal of interpreting is to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap between the speakers and the listeners. The attainment of this goal amounts therefore to quality (Shlesinger et al. 1997).

The most common way to define quality remains the use and analysis of questionnaires. Being aware of the shortcomings of this method, as discussed by the participants of the panel discussion in Turku (Shlesinger et al. 1997), I have ventured to examine the concept of quality as perceived by interpreters taking relay. Following on from earlier empirical studies, I have attempted to investigate the hypothesis that interpreters taking relay would have different expectations regarding quality than interpreters not faced with relay or conference participants, i.e. the usual end-users of their services.

I have been inspired by similar studies in the field, notably Buehler (1986), Kurz (1989), Marrone (1993), Kopczyński (1994) and Moser (1996). The questionnaires conducted by the above-mentioned researchers focused on the respondents’ opinions as to the relative importance of the criteria that have been devised to assess quality. In order to make the results of my survey comparable with the other studies, I have chosen to focus on most of the variables suggested by Buehler, Kurz and Kopczyński.

The other source of inspiration for my study was a recent contribution to the AIC COMMUNICATE: a publication by professional interpreters open to the public at large on the Net. In his article Kahane (2000: 2) formulates a number of problems related to the notion of quality as perceived by interpreters who must rely on a pivot to do their job. Although relay should be avoided whenever possible, Kahane writes that “it is actually used more frequently than we care to admit”, adding that “relay is standard procedure at the JICS (...) and is well on its way to become institutionalised with the coming enlargement. Since the issue has not yet been studied, we still do not know

whether the ‘ideal’ interpretation for listeners is equally ideal for interpreters who use it to produce yet another version”. Marzocchi and Zucchetto (1997: 83) add that

“(…) the widespread use of relay suggests that there is a need for an analysis of the constraints pivots have to face in view of their double audience (the participants of the meeting and relaying colleagues)”.

#### 4.1. Questionnaire: quality as perceived by interpreters taking relay

The survey was addressed to professional conference interpreters who have considerable experience in relay. The respondents were asked to indicate the most important factors affecting the quality of the performance of their “pivot” colleagues. The idea was to encourage interpreters to assess those factors that in their opinion could facilitate their performance when taking relay and those that were considered most irritating. All interpreters were also invited to share their additional comments and observations. The summary of the results presented below has been prepared on the basis of twenty questionnaires that have been returned by the respondents.

The list of the criteria presented to interpreters and the summary of the achieved results is presented in the tables below.

Table 1

Functions of interpreting (in %)

| Function                                    | First choice | Second choice | Third choice | Overall |
|---|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------|
| logical cohesion of utterance               | 50           | 40            | 5            | 95      |
| sense consistency with the original message | 45           | 25            | 15           | 85      |
| fluency of delivery                         | 5            | 20            | 20           | 45      |
| terminological precision                    |              | 10            | 20           | 30      |
| completeness of interpretation              |              | 5             | 20           | 25      |
| correct grammatical usage                   |              |               | 10           | 10      |
| native accent                               |              |               | 5            | 5       |
| pleasant voice                              |              |               | 5            | 5       |

Table 2

Irritants (in %)

| Irritant             | First choice | Second choice | Third choice | Overall |
|----------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------|
| unfinished sentences | 40           | 30            | 15           | 85      |
| terminology mistakes | 30           | 35            | 10           | 75      |
| too general content  | 25           | 10            | 35           | 70      |
| lack of fluency      | 5            | 25            | 30           | 60      |
| grammar mistakes     |              |               | 10           | 10      |

## 4.2. Summary of the results

Not surprisingly, table 1 shows that interpreters on relay regard logical cohesion and sense consistency with the original as the most highly valued criteria. Native accent and pleasant voice are the least valued. Those findings directly correspond to the results of former questionnaires (esp. Buehler 1986, Kurz 1989 and Kopczyński 1994). The earlier studies demonstrated that both users and interpreters attach the greatest value to content-related criteria, while expressive and linguistic criteria are considered less important. On the whole, however, interpreters tend to rate the latter much higher than users do. It is worth noting at this point that some of the interpreters taking relay expressed their reservation to the criterion of "pleasant voice". Their line of criticism was very much similar to the remarks made by the participants of the Turku pannel discussion on quality (Shlesinger et al. 1997).

Somewhat surprisingly, in the case of the interpreters taking relay logical coherence of their colleagues' interpretation turned out to be appreciated slightly more than their sense consistency with the original. One possible explanation of this phenomenon (as evidenced by further discussion with the respondents) could perhaps be the fact that they tend to take for granted that their colleagues do not diverge from the original message, while coherence and fluency of delivery (third most important criterion) are more conspicuous and have immediate bearing on the performance of the interpreters taking relay. Some interpreters, however, observed that the relay interpreter is in no position to judge faithfulness and cohesion. One can be coherent and unfaithful or faithfully incoherent, they remarked.

Interestingly enough, terminological precision ranked only fourth, after fluency of delivery. Additional questions posed to the respondents have, perhaps, brought their motivations to light. On the one hand, they agreed that grave terminological errors may lead to break-down in communication, on the other, however, they indicated that interpreters on relay may use their skills, whenever possible, to correct their incoming message and produce perfectly acceptable interpretation. This observation might potentially give rise to a very promising, more detailed study into the process of simultaneous assessment of their colleagues' interpretation as performed by interpreters taking relay and the limitations involved in the light of processing capacity constraints and the Effort Models (Gile 1995a).

The findings of the second section of the questionnaire seem to confirm the conclusions drawn from the first one. Unfinished sentences turned out to be the most annoying irritants. They were followed by terminology mistakes (those gravest as respondents, when furthered questioned, admitted) and too vague content. Most interpreters agreed that they appreciated interpretation that was more fluent and coherent than the original message, sometimes pre-digested. They admitted they were aware of the additional stress that their colleagues need to manage when faced with their double audience and were willing to turn a blind eye to occasional minor mistakes.

Additional comments presented by the respondents revealed that another annoying thing a pivot can do and one which significantly affects the work of the relay interpreter is the pivot's habit of pausing for a relatively long period, then spluttering out a whole passage very quickly only to pause again and repeat the sequence. Poor booth etiquette was also indicated as very irritating.

The comments presented above are inevitably limited in scope, as they are based upon the observations of a limited number of interpreters and a restricted sample of data. The study has, unfortunately, not been able to cast light on the issue of time-lag in relay and the methods that interpreters taking relay employ to make up for the loss in immediacy. Hopefully, some of the issues raised in this paper will be taken up and further expanded in future research.

## 5. Conclusion

Relay is a fact of life, we all have to live with it. So is retour. The question is not whether to interpret into a B language, but how to train future interpreters and sensitize them to the manifold challenges they will meet during their everyday performance as pivots. There seems to be consensus as to the need for multicenter studies that could shed more light on the concept of quality. This paper was meant to make a small contribution to this end. Nevertheless, more research is needed. Some unexplored aspects of quality in relay interpreting seem to offer promising grounds for further investigations. Such studies will hopefully be taken up by researchers and curricula developers and integrated into even more successful training programmes for would-be interpreters.

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