English for Special Purposes used by and for Non-native English-speaking Interlocutors: The Interpreter's Role and Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is aimed at exploring and discussing the role and responsibility of the interpreter, both liaison and simultaneous, at encounters where English is the main channel of communication and the interpreter is called to translate English for Special Purposes (ESP) between non-native English interlocutors.

Discussion will be based on the analysis of several scenarios taken from the medical, technical and financial world where peer relations between the interlocutors involved as well as knowledge of ESP and/or standard language usage vary and affect communication accordingly.

The analysis is aimed at discussing the interpreter's intervention in the scenarios studied and how s/he can effectively facilitate communication, not only by providing a linguistically accurate translation, but also by understanding the parties involved and preventing disappointment in the clients' expectations.

The paper will also show how the form of interpreting used can largely influence the translation and, thus, comprehension among the parties.

Interpreting is traditionally divided into different forms in relation to the setting or environment where the interpreting takes place, language direction, social dynamics and the technique used in the performance of interpreting. Hence, the distinction between conference interpreting (namely simultaneous, consecutive, *chuchotage*) and liaison/community interpreting. In dialogic contexts, interpreting is generally more interpersonal since the interpreter is actively involved in the communicative event, while other types of interpreting are seen as more mechanical (Roberts 1997: 11). This distinction, however, may become less marked when we consider that the interpreter, in line with what Gentile states (1993: 257), is actually always performing the same function in any type of context: he is acting as a conduit, relaying a message from one language to another. Indeed, the common denominator for all forms of interpreting is the use of language to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages. Interpreting is a discipline that must be connected primarily to language (Roy 2000: 40) and language variety, and linguistic strategies are adopted by interpreters according to the context they are mediating in. Context is determined by the work setting where the interpreting takes place, which could be a conference, a small meeting, a healthcare institute or a court; it is also determined by the participants that are involved in the encounter, their level of language knowledge and their peer relations.

In general, in non-interpreter-mediated encounters, communication is affected by the relations and knowledge shared by participants, and is adapted accordingly. Experts of a specific field share the same expertise and language and, therefore, their communication exchanges will be based on that knowledge with the awareness that they will achieve mutual understanding. On the contrary, experts will adapt their language as well as their communication strategies if they are transferring an expert message to laypersons. However, communication and language use may change, even at an expert level, if the language of communication is not the speakers' mother tongue.

This chapter will explore and discuss the role and responsibility of the interpreter, both conference and community, at encounters where English is the main channel of communication and the interpreter is called to translate English for Special Purposes (ESP) between non-native English interlocutors.

Today, a growing phenomenon interpreters are faced with, is the increased use of the English language as the *lingua franca* of communication (ELF), which may be used as the source or target language by and for non-native English language speakers (NNES). ELF is the contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication (Firth 1996: 240). As Mauranen and Metsä-Ketelä (2006: 2) state, ELF is today's means of communicat-

ing with the rest of the world. Importantly, ELF is not employed only in a general or standard way, but it is used by a plethora of in-groups and special domains that are linguistically and intellectually demanding, thus going beyond simple routines or rudimentary exchanges (Mauranen 2006a: 147). The proficiency in English of ELF users varies a good deal (*ibid.*: 154) and, therefore, interpreters who translate into English for NNES or from English spoken by NNES, need to adapt the linguistic approach of their performance.

Special language proficiency is indeed a prerequisite for professional interpreters, who are often asked to interpret highly specialised terminology in different field areas, as Garzone (2006: 13) points out: "Specialized vocabulary is the access key to specialized discourse in any given professional field [...] and it represents an essential component in a translator's competence". Interpreters have to be accustomed to the features and use of languages for special purposes (LSPs). The use of LSPs in meetings corresponds to the use by the speakers of particular discourse strategies at the level of both lexis and morphosyntax which are used in specific settings to meet specifically-defined professional aims (cf. Cortelazzo 1990).

In these situations, it is not sufficient that interpreters know the LSP terminology they are asked to interpret, as they also need to grasp and convey the communicative goals of the speakers: one of the interpreter's roles is to facilitate communication between the parties and make sure that the message comes across. But what happens when the experts are not native English language speakers and have limited English proficiency (LEP)? Few studies have so far addressed the question of mutual intelligibility in interactions between experts who communicate using ELF (cf. Gass & Varonis 1984; House 1999; Jenkins 2006, 2007; Mauranen 2006b; Seidlhofer 2001, 2002, 2005, Smith & Nelson 1985; Smith 1992), and only a few studies have analysed interpreters' perspectives and difficulties of translating in ELF encounters (Albl-Mikasa 2010; Kurz & Basel 2009; Reithofer 2011). In order to understand how interpreters behave in NNES environments, this chapter will present three interpreter-mediated scenarios taken from real-life situations where peer relations and language knowledge vary and thus affect communication accordingly. The possible difficulties encountered by the interpreters, their responsibilities and the strategies they adopt will be discussed.

2. The scenarios

2.1. *Doctor-patient encounter*

The first scenario describes a doctor-patient encounter in an Italian healthcare institution where the interpreter is asked to translate between an Italian speaking

paediatrician and a Chinese couple. The purpose of the encounter is to provide the couple with an explanation of the disorder their newborn is affected by. The mediating language is English, which the Chinese patients claim to understand.

Physician's utterance: *La glicogenosi tipo II (GSD II) è una malattia da accumulo lisosomiale autosomica recessiva dovuta al deficit di alfa-glucosidasi acida, che idrolizza il glicogeno e comporta un accumulo intra-muscolare di glicogeno.*

[English translation: Glycogen-storage disease type II, also referred to as Pompe disease, is an autosomal recessive lysosomal storage disorder due to the deficiency of acid alpha-glucosidase that results in a progressive accumulation of glycogen in muscle tissue.]

Interpreter's version: Pompe's disease or Glycogenosis type 2 is a genetic disorder transmitted with a modality that is called "autosomal recessive", which means that parents have the disease but show no symptoms. They have a 25% risk of having an affected child at every pregnancy. The disease is caused by a defect of an enzyme, called alpha-glucosidase, which is necessary to separate glucose molecules from glycogen. Glucose is the sugar that gives energy to the body. This sugar is stored in the form of glycogen in our body, when there is no need to use it. If the enzyme is not working it means that the body cannot use the sugar, and so we will have a progressive accumulation of glycogen particularly in the muscles with their gradual damage.

For the purpose of this chapter, only a selected example of the physician's and interpreter's utterances and attitudes are described and analysed, and not the overall interaction. Clearly, the above sentences show that the physician employs a peer-to-peer variant of medical LSP, resorting to technical vocabulary and concepts which require sound medical knowledge for them to be understood. The physician does not seem to take into account that his final interlocutors are not native speakers of either the language he is speaking – Italian – or the target interpreted language, English; indeed, his linguistic choice may be due to the presence of the interpreter. In healthcare settings, the interpreter is often seen as the bi-lingual helper who is expected to know, understand and be able to transfer the LSP sub-genre and information that is provided by the healthcare providers. Another reason for the physician's attitude may be that, as Kiemanh *et al.* (2008: 115) remark, interpretations (i.e. the presence of interpreters) negatively affect doctors' ability to provide emotional support and rapport and decrease their degree of empathy. Hence, his choice in this encounter to use the most specialist register of medical language that creates greater, hierarchical detachment between the interlocutors. The interpreter's translation, instead, shows that he is playing an active role in the triadic exchange by adapting the speaker's discourse to the listener's non-specialist level. As Knapp-Potthoff (cited in Meyer 1998: 2) shows, the dialogue interpreter adapts dialogue by omitting, condensing or expanding; in our case, the interpreter performs an adaptation of discourse through expan-

sion: he explains the concept in greater detail and simplifies the LSP, using a much lower register of English medical language.

Since doctor-patient communication mediated by interpreters has been studied relatively widely, interpreters are aware that language barriers and their approach to facilitate communication are the most fundamental issues in the case of NNES patients (Flores & Karliner *et al.*, cited in Garrett 2009: 48). It is well established that language barriers contribute to health disparities for LEP patients (Jacobs *et al.*, cited in Karliner *et al.* 2007: 728) and that interpreters are language facilitators who provide a necessary communication bridge for the patient with LEP (Garrett 2009: 48).

In the encounter being analysed, the interpreter's strategy is to promote language concordance between patient and physician. In so doing, he shows to have both excellent linguistic and social skills: he has a sound knowledge of medical language, which allows him to grasp the meaning of the message and transfer it by using a variety of medical English that is more intelligible for a lay person. Moreover, he comprehends the patients' social need to clearly understand what they are being told. In this situation, the interpreter carries out his responsibility of transferring comprehensible messages and at the same time becomes an advocate for the powerless NNES patients (Hale 2008: 102; Valero-Garcés & Downing 2007: 327). In a situation such as the one presented by this encounter, much responsibility is, however, placed on the interpreter, who is no longer a mere bilingual helper, but an actor that becomes actively involved in the encounter in order to promote intercommunication and mutual understanding.

2.2. *Training day in a multinational fashion company*

The second scenario is a training day organised by a multinational fashion company for its sales staff. The trainers are the company's fashion designers and technical experts who are providing a training session on textile and footwear technicalities. The source language is Italian and the target language is English, which is translated to a diversified group of international listeners; the form of interpreting used is whispered (*chuchotage*) interpreting.

The speakers first describe the process whereby a shoe is made explaining that:

Trainer: *La costruzione di una scarpa su misura è un'operazione molto complessa che si realizza attraverso una serie di operazioni eseguite a mano. Si inizia col prendere la misura del piede e su questa misura si costruisce **la forma in legno** che viene modificata in base alle caratteristiche del piede.*

Interpreter: The construction of a tailored, made-to-measure shoe is a highly complex process which is realised through a series of hand-made operations. First, the foot is measured and then **the wooden last** is constructed, which is then modified according to the features of the foot.

After the interpreter's first utterance of the technical term *last* in his translation, which is evidently not grasped by the listeners, he decides to replace it with the simpler *mould/shape*. One of the trainers, on hearing the simplification to *mould* or *shape*, addresses the interpreter at work to clarify – with some aura of superiority and bewilderment at the interpreter's lack of knowledge – that the correct translation is *last*. The training providers are thus visibly concerned about the correct use of technical terminology for the purpose of the training, but are unaware of the listeners' linguistic background.

The speakers then go on to say that: "*La pelle stampa razza è bottalata*". In this case, the interpreter could simply provide the exact technical translation: "*The sting ray-effect leather is barrel-dyed*", and may possibly do so at the beginning of the assignment when little is known about the listeners and their knowledge of English. While in the first scenario (§ 2.1) it is fairly easy for the interpreter to assume that the patients do not have the same LSP knowledge as the physician and, therefore, an adaptation of his translating strategy is naturally expected, in this second case the interpreter may assume – before and at the beginning of the encounter – that the listeners share at least the same LSP knowledge and understanding of the technicalities of the sector, as they are a part of the same company. The interpreter may identify the target group as Hymes' (1974: 54) "speech community" which shares the rules for the interpretation of one linguistic variety – the textile/footwear variety in this case. Hence, the interpreter's conventional translation strategy would be expected to serve as a channel or bridge of communication which simply relays a message from one speaker to another (Roy 2000: 101). The interpreter in this scenario may certainly start his role by faithfully translating the technical LSP terminology used by the speakers, thus providing the expected accuracy and satisfying the speaker's communicative and training objective – hence, proving highly specialised preparation and professionalism. However, interpreters do not simply process information and passively pass it on to the listeners. They often act intuitively or objectively to adapt their translation quickly to the situation. In our scenario, closeness to the listeners allows the interpreter to immediately grasp that, being NNES, they do not have an adequate enough ESP knowledge to be able to follow and benefit from the training: they do not grasp the meaning of *last*, *sting ray* and *barrel-dyed*. Admittance to this by the listeners is never – or very rarely – to be expected, since it would make them feel inferior or not suitably prepared. Thus it is the interpreter's role and responsibility not just to "interpret", but to realise the level of the listeners' ESP competence and choose whether to a) opt for the simpler or more generic ESP terms or b) use the correct English technical terms followed by an explanation of their meanings. Our interpreter decides to add extra explanatory information to the translation that will enable the listeners to actually understand the concept and therefore adds: "*The sting ray-effect leather, that is leather printed with a fish skin effect – the sting ray is a fish – is treated in barrels in such a way as to give it a rough touch*" and repeats for further clarification "*the leather is not smooth to the touch*". This clearly

puts more strain on the interpreter, who not only must have the technical knowledge in order to give a clear definition of the product, but also must give more information than the speaker in the same timeframe.

Other choices the interpreter has had to make in this interpreting event regard the translation of terms such as *ram*, *boar* or *kid*, used to refer to types of leather used by the company. It may be assumed that these terms are commonly understood, even though this may not be the case for NNES and that is why the interpreter opts to translate them with *male sheep*, *male pig* and *baby goat*. The trainers also explain the reason why the term *cavallino* (foal) is extensively used by the fashion industry. The interpreter's skill in the translation of this technical term is to be able to explain that the term "*Foal leather is actually the name given to foal-effect calfskin. Foal is the baby horse*". Not only does the interpreter have to explain what *cavallino* actually is, but he also needs to add what kind of animal a foal is. Moreover, the interpreter uses 16 words against the 2 words uttered by the original speaker.

The interpreter's choices described above may be viewed as a way of advocating for the listeners as well as minimising the speaker's communicative goal, but in fact the interpreter actually analyses the constituent parts of the message in order to be able to transmit it in the target language so that what has been said is understood clearly and immediately. Faithfulness and accuracy are certainly two indispensable factors of a quality interpreting process, but the interpreters' task indeed requires knowledge of a discourse system, which as Roy (2000: 103) puts it, includes grammar, contextual knowledge, language use, participant relationships and, I would add, knowledge of the listeners' understanding of the target language in general and of technical jargon in particular. In line with what Seleskovitch states (1978: 24), the interpreter knows that the technical jargon which he hears must be transmitted in a way that is as intelligible for his listeners as it is to those participants listening to the original.

2.3. Speech at a clinical engineering company

The third scenario is the simultaneous interpretation of a speech given by the President of a multinational clinical engineering company to his peers at the managers' Annual General Meeting. The speaker talks in English, although it is not his mother tongue, and his speech is rather informal, as it is given towards the end of a two-day informal conference among peers and is aimed at motivating managers to improve turnover.

President: *The statement be ok. P&L good. We do good but now we go, point. We better T&L and PHI technology for RPM. This must do for money. Point.*

The speaker widely uses ESP terminology, such as *P&L* (profit and loss), *T&L* (time and labour), *RPM* (remote patient monitoring), which is understood by the other

managers and poses no problems for the interpreter who has become accustomed to this terminology during the conference and due to his prior preparation. What instead causes some difficulty for the interpreter is the speaker's poor implementation of English grammar. The lack of tenses, clauses and connectors means that little sense can be made as to whether the speaker is talking about the past, the present or the future. The interpreter needs to rely on his intuition to extrapolate the meaning of the message, based on what has been said during the conference so far, or on his knowledge about the cultural background of the speaker, who in our case is Italian. For example, *point* is translated literally from the Italian *punto e basta* to mean *that's it, that's all*: by understanding this the interpreter can grasp the speaker's intention to convey the idea that either the company needs to work hard and that's all it needs to do, or that the company has worked hard so far but that it is time to move on.

As Seleskovitch (1978: 97) explains: "The better the interpreter understands the speaker's thought the more it becomes his own thought and the more the three steps involved in interpretation (listening, understanding and expression) appear to blend into two (listening and expression)". Interpreters must adjust their own translation, regardless of the original, to suit the listeners: they must not hesitate and must thus play their part in the trilogue, contributing to the smooth running of the conference. All questions of LSP knowledge aside, "the interpreter will certainly grasp the message better than the foreign participant for whom the culture of the speaker is unknown and he can clarify the underlying assumptions" (*ibid.*: 22) and, by concentrating and analysing, he can compensate for the non-clarity.

3. Conclusion

The above three interpreting scenarios show that there is a certain degree of convergence between liaison, whispered and simultaneous interpreting, when non-native English speakers are involved in the event. Despite the different forms of interpreting used, the interpreters are faced with similar difficulties and need to be able to adjust their translation, whether they are translating for LEP listeners or from LEP speakers. "Adjustment – as Seleskovitch (1978: 112) remarks – not only influences the interpreter's choice of words, but also brings him to make his message more or less explicit depending on the amount of common ground the listener and the speaker share" and on the LSP knowledge they share. Interpreters' primary concern is to make sense of what one person means when saying something and to convey that same sense to another person (Roy 2000: 22). How something is said and meant is guided by a number of relationships, such as speaker intentions, communication strategies, linguistic forms, context and

discourse genre. The same rules guide the performance of the interpreter who, on top of all this, also needs to take into account whether the participants are native language speakers of the language the interpreter is translating into. Today, this is particularly important if we consider that English is increasingly used as the international language by and for NNES. As Graddol (2004: 1330) states: "English is a dominant, and dominating, language in many different domains and this dominance seems unlikely to change at least for the next fifty years". Hence, interpreters need to work and be trained with a view that sooner or later they will be confronted with the task of translating into English for NNES. Adaptation and adaptability are the key skills of an interpreter in these situations. Firstly, the interpreter must understand (either intuitively or objectively) the needs and knowledge of the audience or be able to establish these as he proceeds, in order to adapt the utterances he interprets so as to achieve optimum communication. Secondly, the interpreter must be able to size up the situation and make a rapid decision as to what strategy to adopt in order to prevent any communicative breakdown or disappointment and facilitate the exchange.

The scenarios described above also show how proximity to the participants plays a fundamental part in helping interpreters understand the parties involved and their knowledge of the language used. Liaison interpreting has always been differentiated from the other forms of interpreting for the closeness to participants which facilitates the work of the interpreter who becomes an active interlocutor in the triadic exchange. Whispered or *chuchotage* interpreting is traditionally "categorised" as a form of conference interpreting, in that it is a one-way translation process where the interpreter's role appears more passive and non-involved. Certainly, the interpreter is not directly involved in managing and coordinating the communicative event nor does he interpret in two directions. However, by being close to listeners it is easier for the interpreter to understand to what extent technical terms and discourses are understood by them and s/he can thus adopt the most adequate strategy. The third scenario that is described is slightly different from the first two, since it involves a simultaneous interpreter, who in his booth is relatively remote from his audience and may have limited possibilities of feedback and adaptation of the message.

To sum up, translating LSP from and for NNES requires a great deal of effort on the part of the interpreter. As Roy (2000: 128) states, successful interpreting is not effortless and is not automatic. Interpreters in their work will always be confronted with a varied spectrum of interpreting tasks and, as language specialists, they need to be prepared to be able to facilitate interaction in all situations, including those which involve participants with limited proficiency in English.

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