

## Agency in Conference Interpreting: Still a Myth?

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Despite the change in the academic discourse foregrounding “agency” in translation and interpreting, the image of conference interpreting in the eyes of the outsiders still centers around the “non-presence of the interpreter in his/her own interpretation”. Outsiders continue to praise interpreters when they think the interpreter is fully loyal to the speaker and criticise them very harshly when they think there is a deviation from the word of the speaker. This is especially true in the representation of the profession(al) by the media. This paper aims to contribute to the analysis of the discourse on conference interpreting by reviewing the recent examples of news reporting on conference interpreting in the mainstream and social media, and by critically reflecting on the (in)adequacy of the response of the professional world to these developments.

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**T**he traditional discourse on interpreting, mostly based on simultaneous conference interpreting (CI), has tended to present interpreters as professionals who can remain neutral to and detached from the verbal and social interaction they interpret. This view of interpreters and interpreting has been challenged by the more critical discourse that surrounds non-conference settings, such as court and community interpreting. In the research on community, court and sign language interpreting, the traditional notion of interpreters as “conduits” and assumptions of neutrality, completeness and accuracy as well as the impact of culture, power, context and language differences have been subjected to a critical reassessment. Various studies have looked at the role of interpreters as active participants and organisers of the interaction (e.g. Roy 2000, Wadensjö 1998), the functions of the interpreters in refugee hearings (e.g. Barsky 1994, 1996), the impact of the interpreters in the courtroom (e.g. Morris 1995, 1998); in police interrogations (e.g. Wadensjö 1997), in healthcare settings (e.g. Kadric and Pöchhacker 1999), in war (e.g. Thomas 1997; Baker 2006; Inghilleri 2010), and the active role

of interpreters in sign language interpreting (e.g. Tate and Turner 2002).

More recently, conference interpreting as a discipline has also started looking into how the presence and performance of the interpreter shapes and is shaped by the social and interactional context (e.g. Pöchhacker 1994, Diriker 2004, Beaton 2007, Monacelli 2009). The emphasis placed on “agency” in translation and interpreting has raised a number of critical issues, such as the personal and professional involvement of the interpreter and especially personal and professional ethics (Inghilleri 2009, Kinnunen and Koskinen 2010).

Despite the change in the academic discourse, the image of the profession in the eyes of the outsiders still centers around the “non-presence of the interpreter in his/her own interpretation”. Outsiders continue to praise interpreting when they think the interpreter is fully loyal to the word, and criticise it very harshly when they think there is a deviation from the word of the speaker. This is especially true in the representation of CI by the media. With the widespread use of facebook and blogs, anyone with alternative views or strong feelings about how an interpreter should have acted in a given situation can go online, criticise the actual performance and present his or her ‘correct’ interpretation. As I will explore in my analysis, in some recent events that attracted the attention of the media, people have uploaded the actual performance of the interpreter together with their own ‘correct’ translations presented in the form of subtitles, directly or indirectly accusing the interpreters of failing to perform “faithfully”.

This paper aims to contribute to the analysis of the discourse on conference interpreting by reviewing the recent examples of news reporting on CI in the mainstream and social media, and by critically reflecting on the (in)adequacy of the response of the professional world to these developments.

## Discourse on Conference Interpreting

The general discourse on CI has tended to present CI as a *profession* involving complex cognitive skills. The professional is usually presented as a high-profile expert with excellent languages, whose task is to transfer to another language the *message* intended by the speaker. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) states on its website:

To interpret is first and foremost to understand the intended message perfectly. It can then be detached from the words used to convey it and reconstituted in all its subtlety in words of the target language. (<http://aiic.net/en/tips/students/students1.htm>)

For long years, and to a large extent even today, the academia has also defined the task of CI as involving the extraction and presentation of the “message” of the speaker. Roberts states:

The goal of conference interpretation [...] is a relatively smooth presentation of the cognitive content of the message, with the interpre-

ter extracting the ideas from the oral discourse and reproducing them in an appropriate form and register in the target language. (1732)

While the interpreters and their organisations have carefully underlined the salience of “transferring the meanings intended by the speakers”, the discourse of the outsiders has almost obsessively defined the task of the interpreters as entailing a transfer of the speaker’s *words*. Outsiders to the profession have praised conference interpreters whenever they have felt the interpreters remained “loyal to the speakers’ words”, and they have been very critical of the profession(al) whenever they have concluded the opposite.

“Loyalty to the original meaning” is indeed the most pervasive theme in the discourse of the outsiders and it can be detected everywhere from dictionary entries, to news reporting on CI. To give an example from dictionaries, which contain the most concise and widespread definitions on any subject matter, here is an entry on “(to) interpret” in *The Collins Cobuild Dictionary of English Language*:

**interpret:**

1. if you **interpret** what someone says or does in a particular way, you decide that this is its meaning or significance.
2. if you **interpret** a novel, dream, result, etc., you give an explanation of what it means.
3. if you **interpret** a work of art such as a piece of music, a play, a dance, etc., you perform it in a particular way, especially a way that shows your feelings about it.
4. if you **interpret** what someone is saying, you translate it immediately into another language, so that speakers of that language can understand. (Sinclair 763)

All forms of interpreting, except the definition of interlingual interpreting in item 4, entail the active engagement of the person who is interpreting (i.e., interpreter). In the first three definitions, the interpreter is seen as directly involved in shaping the object of interpretation, such as dreams, results, meanings of utterances and actions, piece of music, play, dance, etc. The definition of interlingual interpreting is the only one where the interpreting process is conceived to be independent of the interpreter’s involvement.

The difference in the definition of interlingual and other forms of interpreting becomes more obvious in the entry on the “interpreter” in the same dictionary:

**interpreter:**

1. a person who repeats what someone else is saying by translating it immediately into another language so that other people can understand it.

2. a person who explains the meaning or significance of something.
3. a person who performs a work of art in a particular way, especially a way that shows the performer's feelings about it. (ibid: 764)

Clearly, the definition of the interlingual interpreter in item 1 is the only one that does not foreground the active involvement of the interpreter in the interpretation process. While all other “interpreters” bring in their subjectivity to the interpretation process (by explaining the meaning or significance of something or performing a work of art in a way that shows their feelings), the interlingual interpreter is defined as one who *repeats* what a speaker says in another language.

The media is also a major propagator of the discourse of “absolute loyalty to the words of the speaker” (for an analysis of the discourse of the Turkish media between 1998-2003, see Diriker 2003). An analysis of some of the more recent news reporting on CI both in Turkey and the world indicates that the obsession with “loyalty to the original word” is also quite pervasive in the international media.

In fact, the title of the blockbuster movie *Lost in Translation* appears to be a good expression of an underlying fear vis-a-vis translation and interpretation. This is evident in the articles that both praise and criticise CI. For instance, the following news excerpt praises UN interpreters for making sure that nothing gets lost in translation:

**UN Interpreters make sure nothing is lost in translation** – Think you are good in languages? Try applying for one of the toughest translation jobs on earth [...].

Mastering the language is only the start to being a good interpreter. In a UN guide for would-be language specialists, the job appears to be equal parts diplomat, rocket scientist, and traffic cop. “A good translator”, it reads, “knows techniques for coping with a huge variety of difficult situations, has iron nerves, does not panic, has a sense of style, and can keep up with a rapid speaker”. (<http://www.speroforum.com>)

In reporting moments of “misinterpretation”, the reference to the title of the movie is deployed even more forcefully. Here is an example from the CNN's account of the press meeting of the presidents of the USA and China:

**Press Conference Lost in Translation** – The joint news conference with the two presidents started off just fine [...]. Then came the “lost in translation” moment that turned the press availability into what felt like one long Chinese-language lesson.

It started when both presidents were asked about human rights in China. Mr. Obama answered but, in a confusing moment, Mr. Hu did not. Instead, the translator began translating Mr. Obama's answer.

Then they went on to another question. So another U.S. reporter asked the human rights question again, hinting the Chinese president might have tried to avoid it.

President Hu was not amused: “First, I would like to clarify, because of the technical translation and interpretation problem, I did not hear the question about the human rights,” he said. “What I know was that he was asking a question directed at President Obama. As you raise this question, and I heard the question properly, certainly I’m in a position to answer that question.” And he did. (<http://whitehouse.blogs.cnn.com/2011/01/19/a-lost-in-translation-press-conference>)

To be praiseworthy in the eyes of the media, it seems almost obligatory that interpreters remain loyal to the word, and even to the letter, of the original speech. The following excerpt from a Turkish daily shows this approach quite clearly: “Interpreters carry a tremendous responsibility: Is it easy to bear the responsibility of interpreting the *words* of a speaker simultaneously and *without making any errors* during a very important meeting?” (*Milliyet* 02.09.1989).

The media is full of news where interpreters are accused of failing to deliver the speaker’s speech. One such example pertains to the way a Farsi interpreter interprets the statement by the President of Iran, leading Iran to ban the news agency from operating in Iran:

IRNA reported Monday that the Iranian government banned CNN journalists from working in the country after a translation error broadcast by CNN mistakenly reported Iran’s President as saying his nation has the right to build nuclear weapons. ([http://articles.cnn.com/2006-01-17/world/iran.cnn\\_1\\_translation-error-nuclear-weapons-president-mahmoud-ahmadinejad?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2006-01-17/world/iran.cnn_1_translation-error-nuclear-weapons-president-mahmoud-ahmadinejad?_s=PM:WORLD))

In this case, CNN has publicly apologised for the mistake and reassured the world public opinion that it will never use this interpreter again:

In a written statement the CNN said it apologised on all platforms which included the translation error, including CNN International, CNN USA and CNN.com. [...]

The translation company, Lesley Howard Languages, apologised to CNN. “Obviously, we’re taking it very, very seriously. We will never use him again,” owner Lesley Howard said, referring to the interpreter. (*ibid*)

In addition to the mainstream media, the growing sophistication of other communication tools also enable individuals to upload their reactions to, and even corrections of, instances they believe have been misinterpreted. A striking example of this can be found in the discussion on how the reaction of Turkey’s Prime Minister towards the former Israeli President Shimon Peres was interpreted at the 2009

World Economic Forum in Davos. People who believe that the interpreter's rendition of PM Erdoğan was "softer" than his original wording have uploaded segments of the recorded event to youtube, presenting the delivery of the interpreters as voice-over and their own translations as subtitles (e.g. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrbQsHkVQ\\_4feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrbQsHkVQ_4feature=related) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHZusFgq3QU>). Not surprisingly, perhaps, these versions, which are tagged as presenting the "correct translation" of the PM's words, contain a considerable number of English errors, to say the least.

## Reaction of the Professional World

In general, the interpreters and their organisations tend to react to such criticism by resorting to the most conventional discourse on interpreting which underscores the role of "the messenger". They generally emphasise that the role of the interpreter is not to translate the *words* of speakers but to render the *meaning* they *intended*. This is also evident in the press release of the Turkish Conference Interpreters' Association (TKTD) issued in reaction to the criticisms raised towards the interpretation at the Davos Summit:

The task of conference interpreters is to render to another language what they hear and perceive, remaining loyal to the essence of the message. It is impossible for the interpreters to interpret the content of a speech according to their own political and ideological concerns or to add or delete anything according to their subjective judgments". ([http://tktd.org/wp/?page\\_id=94](http://tktd.org/wp/?page_id=94), my translation)

The press release also underlines that "interpreting is not a word-for-word transfer of what is said. It is about creating the same perception" (ibid).

Presenting interpreters as professionals "who do not *translate words*, but rather *render the meanings intended by the speakers*" is a recurring pattern in the discourse of the insiders. Interpreters generally use this argument to differentiate their task from that of translators. AIIC's website in its "Advice to Students" makes this quite clear:

To interpret a speech is not to translate it word for word. To interpret a speech from its source language is to transfer its semantic, connotative and aesthetic content into another language, using the lexical, syntactic and stylistic resources of the second, or "target" language for that purpose. (<http://aiic.net/en/tips/students/students1.htm>)

Interpreters also emphasise this point when addressing the media. A professional interpreter, interviewed by the state broadcasting agency in Turkey, states:

Conference interpreting is the exact transfer of an idea voiced in one language to another. I'm saying "idea" here because conference in-

interpreting and interpreters are not parrots, if I may say so, who only interpret whatever words they hear. (Interview with two conference interpreters in “Stüdyo İstanbul” program, TRT 2, 25.09.1995)

Clearly, while both outsiders and insiders agree that the most significant feature of CI is remaining “loyal to the original speaker”, they differ on what the interpreters need to remain loyal to, i.e., words vs sense.

The only exception to this tendency occurs when interpreters are asked to recount instances from real-life interpreting behaviour (for a detailed analysis, see Diriker 2004). When telling jokes, interpreters frequently refer to instances where they have acted as key decision-makers and became involved in shaping the message they delivered. When recounting real-life experiences, interpreters can even go further and emphasise that interpreting entails an interpretation, a commentary, a subjective assessment of what is said: “A very good translator is someone who knows the most crucial words. But as we said in the beginning, in oral translation there is *interpretatio*; the difference is there in the name of the tasks” (Interview with two conference interpreters in *Metis Çeviri* 1988: 127, my translation).

However, such comments usually end with a remark whereby the interpreter adds that, no matter what they do, interpreters never deviate from what the speaker intends to say:

The message has to be conveyed very precisely. You cannot allow even the smallest deviation or the smallest intervention. For instance, you may not agree with the speaker. In fact, you may be people who advocate two totally different ideas. However, the only reason for your presence there is that you are an interpreter, you have a mission to fulfill. You are making an *interpretation* but the *message must come across exactly*. Maybe you will not find the best word but you will not use a wrong one either. You must give a correct rendition all the time. Precision, the transfer of the message are a must. (ibid, my translation)

Given the expectations of the outsiders for a word-for-word transfer by a completely neutral and transparent intermediary, the discourse of the interpreters seems to be a way of reconciling the reality with unreal expectations. However, given that unrealistic expectations easily turn into criticism, that is then rapidly disseminated via the new channels of communication, it is very debatable if perpetuating this discourse actually makes the interpreters stronger or more vulnerable.

## Conclusion

The recent interest in the academic world in viewing the interpreters as active “agents”, who shape the communicative event they partake in, is still largely ab-

sent from the public debate on interpreting. Outsiders to the profession, and most notably the media, propagate a very rigid and restricted view of interpreting that foregrounds “loyalty to the words of the speakers”. The media both praises and criticises interpreters according to this highly subjective yardstick. Insiders to the profession, i.e., interpreters and their organisations, on the other hand, ardently emphasise that interpreting is not about “translating the words of speakers”. They suggest that the duty of the interpreters is to “render the meanings intended by the speakers”. Though clearly different in what they foreground, the views of outsiders and insiders converge on defining “loyalty” as the most salient feature of interpreting. “Loyalty”, thus, becomes the most foregrounded aspect in the (re)presentation of the profession(al).

The traditional discourse of the insiders which says “interpreters are only messengers who render the meanings intended by the speakers” reinforces the idea that interpreters can be non-present in their delivery by virtue of their professionalism. Such a meta-discourse on interpreting perpetuates the myth of professional non-presence with which interpreters probably hope to maintain their “symbolic” and “economic power”. However, I would like to argue that, rather than making them stronger, this discourse actually disempowers interpreters and renders them vulnerable to unrealistic expectations which they help to (re)produce by presenting “loyalty” as the defining feature of CI.

Given the challenges imposed by the growing significance of the media, including the social media which enables everyone to access and comment on interpreted events, it seems imperative that insiders revisit the way they view and present their presence and performance. Interpreters are active and critical decision-makers, who perform under time constraints in settings that are characterised by visible and invisible complexities. No profession that requires critical decision-making under severe cognitive and time constraints can ever be absolutely infallible. Fallibility is not a negation of competence and expertise. On the contrary, it is precisely the complexities of the task that make the task special.

While the profession should finally acknowledge and capitalise on its real strengths — understanding and making understood the long years of practice, experience and critical self-reflection involved in the making of an interpreter — it should also be ready to accept accountability when the need arises. Such a change in perspective necessarily entails not only revisiting role definitions of interpreting, but also revisiting professional and individual ethics. Adopting a more realistic discourse that emphasises our true strengths, constraints and responsibilities might be a more powerful representation of the professional than we have ever come to believe.

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