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Walking on a Tightrope The Ups and Downs of Diplomatic Interpreting

المترجم الدبلوماسي بين دفتين

Ilhem Bezzaoucha¹

¹ Translation Institute, Algiers 2 University (Algeria), ilhem.bezzaoucha@univ-alger2.dz

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Abstract:

It is quite hard to be able to convey a diplomat's often nuanced message in an equally nuanced way. An interpreter that works in the three modes of interpreting, whispering, consecutive and simultaneous must have additional qualities to thrive in the field. He must excel in public speaking and respect protocol to name a few attributes.

The oldest form of interpreting known to man, Diplomatic Interpreting is set apart by the skills practising diplomatic interpreters should acquire in order to perform at the highest levels. As the field of diplomatic interpreting (DI) request specific characteristics, it is our understanding that Diplomatic Interpreting deserves its own standing as a sub-field in the profession as we initiated the process at the University of Algiers in 2017.

Keywords: diplomatic interpreting, invisibility, sub-field.

ملخص:

إنه لمن الصعب نقل رسالة الدبلوماسي المثقلة بالمعاني بطريقة تماثلها. فالمترجم الذي يعمل بأنواع الترجمة الثلاثة الهمسية والتتابعية و الفورية يحتاج إلى مزايا إضافية لينجح في الميدان. فعليه أن يحسن فن الإلقاء و يحترم البروتوكول كمثال.

من بين أقدم أشكال الترجمة التي عرفها الانسان نجد الترجمة الدبلوماسية التي تتميز بخصائص معينة حتى يتمكن صاحبها من امتهانها في أرقى المستويات. و بما أن الترجمة الدبلوماسية تتوافر على عدة خصائص، فإنها

Corresponding author : Ilhem Bezzaoucha

تستحق حسب فهمنا مكانة خاصة في المهنة وهذا ما باشرنا به عند إنشاء الترجمة الدبلوماسية كفرع دكتوراه في جامعة الجزائر عام 2017.

كلمات مفتاحية: الترجمة الدبلوماسية، الخفاء، تخصص فرعي

1.Introduction

We noticed a lesser interest on behalf of academia in investigating diplomatic interpreting unlike conference interpreting, police, immigration or court interpreting that seem to have a sensitive and face threatening nature.

Conference interpreting seems to gain the main exclusive concern of trainers and researchers in the 20th century. As cultural and linguistic mediators, interpreters have played an important role for centuries – [crystallised](#) by the evolution of international diplomatic relations and the founding of the UN. DI primary refers to diplomacy and high-level meetings.

We have opted for diplomatic interpreting comprising both diplomacy by conference as in supranational bodies and one to one diplomacy between heads of states, ministers and alike.

2. Professional cloak of invisibility

Numerous metaphors have been created to describe the invisible image and powerless status of the interpreters. Interpreters were accredited as ‘shadows’, ‘echo machine’, ‘voice box’, ‘language converter’ ‘mouthpiece’, ‘bilingual ghosts’, etc

The diplomatic interpreter must strictly comply with etiquette such as dressing appropriately and ensure he does not appear in official photographs and TV shots.

Diplomatic interpreters are often placed next to important officials but a full choreography takes place before the talks. No trace of them is found in the official pictures as their pictures are often chopped off.

Not for the first time have we heard people talk about the image of a ‘perfect’ interpreter in their mind. Ideally, he should not make people feel his presence. He only needs to provide services and should not attract public attention. However, in

real-life interpreting, particularly in diplomatic interpreting settings, such mythical description of the interpreter is only an unrealistic theoretical construct destined to be deconstructed.

A visible interpreter is aware that, because of the bilingual and bicultural resources he possesses, he is able to influence the course of history. He is a 'power figure' simultaneously doing two interrelated things: interpreting the speeches of primary speakers and mediating the progress of communication.

3 .Strict secrecy matters

There is no doubt that translators are a privileged community who witness history from the indoors by having access to one-to-one closed-door meetings between heads of states where not even close aides and ministers have access to.

AS of late, their role has been more crucial as leaders tend to forge personal relations via informal interactions as a stepping stone to healthier bilateral ties.

Even though they are insiders, there have been hardly any leaks attributed to translators so far. As a professionalized medium, interpreters provide special services and also exercise certain control over the conversational process and the information to be transmitted.

Therefore it is possible for them to gate-keep both the content and format of the speakers' utterances. In some sense, the interpreter is also a gate-keeper. In other words, a piece of information will be granted passage only after the information has passed a number of checkpoints.

When in 2017, investigating agencies in Poland wanted to interrogate Magdalena Fitas-Dukaczewska, who was an interpreter for Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk during his meeting in 2010 with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the day of the crash of Polish Air Force One in the Russian city of Smolensk that killed President Lech Kaczynski, she refused to oblige.

She said she would not testify even if the government absolved her from her obligation to maintain confidentiality. She said to do otherwise would destroy her credibility as well as that of her colleagues.

The AIIC code of ethics clearly stipulates that interpreters are "bound by the strictest secrecy" when it comes to non-public events.

Fitas-Dukaczewska is, however, not the first interpreter to be pressured to offer information on confidential talks. Last year, in the US Congress, Democrats had called for President Donald Trump's interpreter to tell them what he and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed in their one-on-one meeting in Helsinki. Congress faced a very hard question: Subpoena President Donald Trump's translator, or not? Fortunately, it did not.

Confidentiality is a central tenet of their profession. Without it, officials in a meeting may not feel comfortable speaking freely, which undermines the purpose of private meeting. Moreover, interpreter's notes are not intended to be transcripts or minutes, but rather memory joggers for themselves, often written in symbols and abbreviations, so they are unlikely to give full accounting of a specific exchange.

Many times, interpreters are usually called 'a necessary evil', they pay services to all the concerned parties, yet people do not expect them to have any substantial influence on the process and outcome of the interaction.

4 .Not so much of a fly on a wall

We come here to the notion of a language interpreter as a "conduit": in any situation a professional interpreter is used, he has no "life of his own" in the sense that he is just a transmitting link between parties who are communicating through the interpreter. And interpreters are mostly contented with this "depersonalized" way, it actually makes their job easier.

But one of the most common complaints we hear from new prospective clients is: "We had problems with interpreters in the past!"

President Donald Trump apparently struggled to understand the English-language interpretation of his Argentine counterpart's Spanish words on the side-lines of the G20 summit in Buenos Aires.

Following Argentine President Mauricio Macri's remarks Friday at a news conference at Macri's Casa Rosada residence, Trump shook the South American

leader's hand before quipping, "I think I understood you better in your language than I did on this, but that's OK." Trump then dropped his earpiece on the floor before making his own comments.(2)

It is essential to pay attention to his exact words "...than I did on this". The interpreter, however, rendered her interpretation as "I think I understood you better in your language than I did on the interpretation".

However the truth is that there was a technical issue and the earpiece was not actually working correctly: "Right after this joint appearance by the presidents, interpreter forums, chatrooms, and tweeter accounts, filled up with strange comments such as: "...I wonder who interpreted for Trump. The rendition was so bad he said he understood better without it..." "...Trump was so mad at the interpreter he tossed the equipment..." "...the interpreter was so brave, she even interpreted the part when Trump said he didn't understand her..." "...it wasn't the interpretation, he said that because (Trump) hates Hispanics..." "...Trump did not like that the interpreter had an Argentinian accent, that is why he did it..." Also, the comments we see all the time: "...I wonder who picked those interpreters..." "...I bet you the interpreter isn't certified..." "...Macri is so incompetent that he hired bad interpreters for his meeting with Trump..."(3)

AIIC came to a conclusion.

On December 3, 2018 they issued a statement in both English and Spanish about the incident: the receiver was at fault "it is sufficiently clear that the issue was not comprehension or the quality of the interpretation, but a problem of a technical nature" (4)

Another example to highlight the visibility if the interpreter: the talk show host was brutal in his talk to the point where he violated the principle of politeness. The interpreter performed gate keeping as he paraphrased the content of the host's question. For a detailed explanation, see Gheorghiu's article (2020) on a taxonomic analysis proposal for research in diplomatic interpreting. (5)

- **Host:** So (name of the country) and NATO after all. After so any years under the communist regime, in NATO lap, Mr Ambassador?

- **Interpreter:** A very important question, Your Excellency. After so many years being part a part of the Warsaw Pact under communist rule, how do you feel about accessing NATO?

5 .Interesting anecdotes

Even when the leader is proficient in the language, they prefer to use an interpreter. Diplomats say it gives them crucial time to formulate their responses.

The most interesting anecdote recorded by philosopher-poet Sir Muhammad Iqbal in his diary is about his visit to Paris in 1932. His friends including Sardar Umrao Singh, the father of famous artist Amrita Shergill, had arranged his meeting with French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson.

Singh had also arranged for an Indian interpreter to record the minutes of the meeting of titans, expecting that the conversation would hold significance for posterity. Iqbal records that during the meeting, he saw the interpreter taking notes constantly while also interpreting between them.

After the meeting was over, when the interpreter was asked to share his notes, he could not read his own writing. Alas, generations were deprived of the details of the rich conversation between the two internationally acclaimed philosophers.

It should be noted however that no proficient interpreter is able to read his own notes after a while. Notes in consecutive interpreting are not meant to transcend time unfortunately.

Zhang Jing is also the Chinese interpreter that went viral after an ‘endless’ consecutive interpreting. A 17 minutes-long consecutive interpreting turn from Chinese into English: this is the setting of the episode that took place during the US-China Summit in Alaska. Regardless of what she was truly saying, the incident shows a rare occurrence: an interpreter making headlines.

A number of personalities stand out in the history of diplomatic interpretation. Probably, no one will ever read their memoirs, since they are bound by a rule of absolute professional secrecy. It is a constraint, for sure, but it is also what makes diplomatic interpretation so fascinating, and sometimes lets us be a part of history in the making.

6. Conclusion

Scholarly neglect has compelled us to write this paper. In spite of its constant presence in international relations and prominent role in the making of history, there is relatively little academic interest in research into diplomatic interpreting.

The motives for this low profile are not so surprising given the configuration of professional markets and training priorities.

DI remains a mysterious branch of the profession. Universities train conference interpreters, not diplomatic interpreters. Diplomats generally speak the language of the host country and interpret as a rule.

There is also the component of secrecy, confidentiality and the difficult access to the diplomatic world. All these elements have also contributed to the scarcity of research in this area.

A step forward might be the introduction of DI research in postgraduate studies as we did at the University of Algiers. We advocate the recognition of the speciality of diplomatic interpreting and call for focussed research in this area.

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