

Words Connect Worlds – Diplomatic Interpreting as a field of interpreting in its own right

الكلمات تربط العوالم: الترجمة الفورية الدبلوماسية كمجال مستقل للترجمة

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Abstract:

It is a gift, but a hard earned one, to be able to convey a diplomat's often nuanced message in an equally nuanced way. It certainly takes more than simply being good at interpreting.

In a single session, diplomatic interpreters use all three traditional interpreting techniques, from simultaneous to both short and long consecutive to first sight and back. In addition, we borrow from many and various fields and often find ourselves acting as ad-hoc intercultural advisers, protocol and etiquette specialists, hospitality experts, group managers, language teachers, and, even, tour guides.(11)

The oldest form of interpreting known to humankind; diplomatic interpreting is set apart by the skills practicing diplomatic interpreters need to perform at the highest levels as well as by the challenges we must rise to when doing our job. Away from the safe seclusion of the booth, traditionally set-in-stone notions such as neutrality suddenly become fluid and full of grey areas, terms such as confidentiality acquire a whole new meaning, and our demeanor as well as the clothes we wear carry almost as much weight as the words we utter. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

As the fascinating, challenging, and highly rewarding field of interpreting it is, and given its characteristics and pivotal role in the increasingly interconnected world of the 21st century, it is my understanding that Diplomatic Interpreting deserves its own standing as a field in our beloved profession, that practising and future diplomatic interpreters should be trained accordingly, and that professional associations should contemplate its unique features when regulating.

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الملخص:

تتناول هذه المقالة دور الترجمة الفورية الدبلوماسية في العصر الحديث، حيث تشير إلى أهمية هذا المجال والتحديات التي يواجهها المترجمون الفوريون الدبلوماسيون. حيث يعتبر نقل المعاني الضمنية للدبلوماسي بأسلوب يوازيه هدية ولكنها هبة مكتسبة بصعوبة. فالأمر قد يستعصي على أفضل الترجمة.

ففي جلسة واحدة، يلجأ المترجم الدبلوماسي إلى الأنواع الثلاثة من الترجمة الشفهية بدءاً من الفورية إلى التتابعية وحتى المنظورة و العكس. أضيف إلى ذلك، يرتدي الترجمان عباءة المستشار العابر للثقافات، وخبير بروتوكول والتطبيقات، وصاحب الضيافة، ومدير المجموعات، ومدرس اللغة، ليصل به الأمر ليتحول إلى مرشد سياحي.

الترجمة الدبلوماسية، أقدم شكل للترجمة المعروف للإنسانية؛ تتميز بالمهارات التي يحتاجها المترجمون الدبلوماسيون العاملون على أعلى المستويات، فضلاً عن التحديات التي يجب علينا أن نواجهها أثناء أداء مهامنا. فبعيداً عن العزلة الآمنة للمقصورة، تصبح المفاهيم المعتادة مثل الحيادية قابلة للتحويل فجأة ومرتعا للمناطق الرمادية، وتكتسب مصطلحات مثل السرية معنى جديداً تماماً، وسلوكنا بالإضافة إلى الملابس التي نرتديها تحمل وزناً يقارب أهمية الكلمات التي ننطقها. وهذا مجرد غيض من فيض.

ونظراً لكونه مجالاً رائعاً ومليئاً بالتحديات ومفعماً بالحياة، ونظراً لخصائصه ودوره المحوري في عالم القرن الحادي والعشرين المترابط بشكل متزايد، فإنني أرى أن الترجمة الدبلوماسية تستحق مكانتها الخاصة كمجال في مهنتنا الحبيبة، يجب تدريب المترجمين الفوريين الدبلوماسيين الممارسين والمستقبليين وفقاً لذلك، ويجب على الاتحادات المهنية التفكير في سماتها الفريدة عند تنظيمها للمهنة.

Introduction

Based on my experience assisting Latin American delegations visiting the United Kingdom, and because of all the reasons detailed below, I believe Diplomatic Interpreting should be treated as a field of interpreting in its own right.

1-Diplomatic Settings

As with everything else in life, diplomacy evolves over time, especially when the times are as changing as the ones we are living in. Experts talk of a transition from 'club diplomacy' to 'network diplomacy' which is accompanied by an expansion in the fields, topics, and types of actors involved in diplomatic efforts.

Therefore, diplomacy is no longer the remit of ministries and ministers of foreign affairs but also that of every single tier and level of government (national, regional, estate, local) and office, as well as that of a plurality of actors from civil society and non-governmental organizations.

Likewise, there is parliamentary diplomacy, celebrity diplomacy, cultural and sports diplomacy, and even food diplomacy. There is also multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral diplomacy, as well as digital and shuttle diplomacy .

Thus, diplomatic interpreters no longer find themselves working in a single type of setting but in a myriad of very different and diverse situations and, in consequence, resorting to tools, techniques, and skills which combination is unique to our work and different to the skill set needed to be proficient in conference, legal, and community interpreting settings. The same applies to our decision-making criteria, as it is dictated by the settings we work in and answers to the expectations of our clients and the users of our services.

2-Diplomatic interpreters' skill set

In my opinion, there are four areas in which the skill set of diplomatic interpreters differs from the skills used in the other fields of interpreting:

- Interpreting skills
- Support skills
- Interpreter role
- Interpreter profile

3-Interpreting skills

Conference, legal, and community interpreters tend to rely on a main mode of interpreting: simultaneous for conference, verbatim consecutive/simultaneous for legal, and dialogue consecutive for community interpreting. However, in our practice, diplomatic interpreters use all interpreting modes, combining them to fit the program requirements .

In a single day, a diplomatic interpreter may use simultaneous interpreting from a booth while interpreting a keynote speech, then switch to liaison interpreting (combining whispering and short consecutive interpreting) during a press conference, resort to long consecutive interpreting during a formal speech, use sight translation to assist with the menu at a gala dinner and move on to dialogue consecutive for the rest of the dinner.(1)

As the teaching of interpretation is not standardized around the world and interpreting programs tend to respond to the major market needs in their geographies, not all schools teach all modes of interpreting and, therefore, not all professional interpreters are proficient in all of them. Thus, calling for further – and specialized – training in most cases as well as for an update of teaching programs.

4-Support skills

The general global trend is for conference interpreters to take on diplomatic interpreting assignments and make any necessary adjustments to their skill set 'on the go'. Although learning by doing has its merits, the lack of proper training and support skills acquisition can easily prove to be a disservice to clients and users of diplomatic interpreting services simply because what is needed to excel as a conference interpreting

does not automatically translate into diplomatic settings. The same applies to legal and community interpreting.

Unlike conference interpreters who tend to deal with the oral linguist output of their speakers, diplomatic interpreters often find ourselves immersed in the entirety of the communicative exchange and, thus, need to be able to process and convey its many facets. These include more in-depth use of additional linguistic skills such as processing nuance, regionalisms, register, and idiosyncratic expressions; as well as discursive skills such as understanding and using the peculiarities of political discourse, pitching techniques, and highly technical lexicon .(2)

Diplomatic interpreters also often find themselves acting as cross-cultural bridges, which makes it vital for us to have thorough understanding of interculturality and its effects on our working cultures and languages. This also extends to protocol and etiquette, especially since they play key part in our ability to decode messages and situations properly .(8)

The plurality of situations diplomatic interpreters work in also means that our performance as public speakers often carry more weight than in all other three fields of interpreting. In consequence, knowledge of oratory and good public speaking skills are key.

5-Diplomatic interpreter role

On top of the variety and diversity of settings in which diplomatic interpreters work, diplomatic interpreting is also unique in that diplomatic interpreters work in very close proximity with our principals (the individuals we interpret for) – the booth glass that separates conference interpreters from their audiences is no more nor are the settings as predictable or highly regulated as in a physician’s office or a courtroom .

Group management skills and a good understanding of how power dynamics among individuals in our working cultures are indeed handy; however, it is the decision-making criteria that I believe needs revising the most – or even creating.

Like it or not, diplomatic interpreters are in the situation, not removed from them working from the side-line. This exposes us to questions, requests for comments and/or assessment, and more and, thus, demands a different exploration and definition of neutrality and objectivity than those stated in most professional associations’ guidelines and codes of conduct .

Consultation offices, courtrooms, and conferences tend to be fairly standard in terms of formality levels and the interaction among the different participants. Diplomatic interpreters may very easily be required to go from a highly formal setting to a more relaxed, casual one in a single day. This versatility requires the utmost flexibility not only in dress codes but also in use of language, tone, and interaction with all the parties involved to the extreme of sometimes determining how much is interpreted and how

6-Diplomatic interpreter profile

Such levels of exposure and immersion make interpreters' individual character a key factor in their performance and the provision of diplomatic interpreting services with temple, poise, and resourcefulness as well as good stress management and self-awareness at the centre .

This also applies to interpreters' personal image and manners, which quickly become an extension of our principal's .

Finally, but of utmost importance, confidentiality and discretion also take a new light when working in diplomatic settings and extends well beyond the content of 'the message'. Selfies and photos shared online are a sure way to breach confidentiality; and so can be acknowledging that meetings and/or events took place .

Conclusion

Given the unique combination of the settings and situations in which it is practised; the use of interpreting techniques; the support skills it requires; the role interpreters play and how we conduct our work; what is expected of us, I believe diplomatic interpreting should be considered a field of interpreting in its own right)If so, then it calls for its own training programmes, continuous professional development, and most especially, its own guidelines and codes of conducts.

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