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## **INTERPRETING QUALITY IN TIMES OF ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA (ELF): NEW VARIABLES AND REQUIREMENTS**

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### *1. Introduction*

In the debate on interpreting quality, there has been a shift in focus from looking at the interpreter's ability to build content, form and performance-related equivalence to "a broader view, based on a notion of interpretation as a complex interactional and communicative event encompassing pragmatic and socio-linguistic factors" (Garzone 2002, 107). Quality is now regarded as a pragmatic optimisation process in a complex socio-relational network (cf. Mack 2002, 114). Kalina (2006), in particular, illustrates how the interpreter's performance needs to be looked at in a much larger context, that is, from the perspective of the overall process, covering different phases before, in, around, and after the actual interpreting activity. In doing so, it becomes possible to cover the great variety of factors that influence interpreting quality, including the interpreter's individual capabilities (e.g., language and subject knowledge, memory capacity, concentration, motivation, and strategic behaviour) as well as customer demands, participant profiles, technical conditions and other situational and non-situational factors (e.g., availability of documentation, research access, time invested). The global spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF) adds yet another dimension. In this paper, I wish to outline how the interpreter's work is affected by the increasing number of non-native English-speaking conference participants.

### *2. The impact of ELF-related factors on interpreting quality*

My analysis is based on a questionnaire survey on the implications of ELF on the interpreting profession, among 32 professional conference interpreters, the majority of whom are freelancers working in the German-speaking market (cf. Albl-Mikasa 2010). From the answers it became clear that ELF-related factors with an aggravating effect on interpreting quality could be identified on three levels of analysis:

1. The comprehension process in the case of non-native English conference speakers;
2. The production process in the case of a mainly non-native English-speaking conference audience;
3. Changing working conditions due to ELF-related developments.

One only has to extend Gile's efforts model (1995/2009) in order to see how the interpreter's resources are additionally taxed in the *comprehension phase* when, faced with non-native English conference speakers, she is trying to grasp foreign accents, recover unfamiliar expressions, resolve unorthodox syntactic structures and compensate for the speaker's lack of pragmatic fluency. Regarding foreign accents, my respondents' introspective comments are supported by studies by Kurz and Basel (2009) and others. A rather grotesque situation arises, according to the respondents, when interpreters have to "backtranslate" the "germanised" English of Germans who insist on speaking English despite a predominantly German-native-speaker audience. While, in target text production, this is rather capacity consuming for the German-English interpreter, on the comprehension side, it is often an impossible task for interpreters who have to translate such "English" into target languages other than German and do not have German as one of their working languages. More often than not, they simply cannot understand what they find hard to recognise as English (cf. Stähle 2009, 170).

With regard to the *production phase*, many interpreters see it as part of their professional duty as language and communication experts to adapt to (the proficiency level of) non-native addressees. They do so despite prior experience that accommodation takes additional time and effort. Respondents clearly associated accommodation with available resources (cf. Albl-Mikasa 2010, 137). These observations are in line with empirical evidence from psycholinguistic research supporting the assumption that accommodation is both "time consuming and cognitively demanding" (Shintel/Keysar 2009, 261). This adds another dimension to Kalina's statement that an interpreter's performance can, in fact, hardly be better than the given source speech (2006, 253). Under the current ELF-related circumstances, the interpreter's performance quality depends in equal measure on (the receptive/linguistic capacity of) her audience.

In addition to these more immediate processing factors affecting interpreting quality, interpreters are increasingly faced with adverse *general conditions*. At a time when "everybody knows English", and due to financial constraints, they are mostly contracted for highly complex and technical events (rather than those that are easier and may be more enjoyable, cf. Albl-Mikasa 2010, 140). At the same time, the esteem with which interpreters are held in the public eye has decreased dramatically. While the simple statement that one was a simultaneous interpreter used to trigger cries of admiration, people now wonder whether interpretation into or from English is still required. Today, interpreters have to advertise their work, draw attention to potential demand and demonstrate the added value they can give (empirical evidence is in the offing supporting their claim, cf. Reithofer

2010). Very high quality standards are often felt to be the only means of going against the tendency towards more and more English-only events.

3. *Consequences for the interpreter's professional self*

The developments and changes in the interpreter's work undisputedly make new demands on the interpreter's competence. This can be demonstrated on the basis of Pöchhacker's competence model ("Kompetenzanforderungsmodell", 2000/2007, 44-45). With a view to ensuring interpreting quality, interpreters' subcompetences (specified in the model as "Sprach- und Kulturkompetenz; Dolmetsch-/Transferkompetenz; Dolmetscher-/Verhaltenskompetenz") will have to be further developed along the following lines:

1. *Linguistic and cultural competence*: Being acquainted with a variety of non-native-speaker accents, styles of expression, and structural and other particularities in their speech;
2. *Interpreting (transfer) competence*: Coping with additional capacity management and developing new strategies;
3. *Interpreter (professional role) competence*: Taking the step from language expert to communication facilitator.

The third point has perhaps the most far-reaching consequences. While interpreters are used to being confronted with new accents from native speakers (Australian, Texan, Scottish, Irish, etc.) and to having to creatively adapt resources and strategies to the great variety of constantly arising new situational conditions, it is their self-image as a communicator that will perhaps have to undergo the most fundamental change. This view is based on a considerable number of qualitative statements and (unprompted) additional comments to my survey questionnaire (which were not incorporated in the 2010 paper analysis).

The picture that interpreters paint of themselves is one of a professional with a great love and infatuation for language and a purist attitude towards it. The majority of respondents voiced rather strong opinions to that effect. They emphasised the joy they find in the richness, beauty and power of verbal expression and they were greatly concerned with the spread of ELF and the consequences this may have for English as well as other languages. They clearly dreaded Anglicisms and code-switching practices and were generally displeased with the increasing use of "bad simple English".

Many respondents deplored the decrease in linguistic differentiation and conceptual selectivity (i.e., the use simply of *Ticket* for what in German would more precisely be *Eintrittskarte* – *Kinokarte*, *Theaterkarte*, *Opernkarte* –, *Fahrkarte*, *Strafmandat*, *Problemmeldung*, *Wahlliste*, *Los*), the impoverishment of language and the distorting effects on it ("please switch off your handys"), the disappear-

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ance of linguistic diversity, the flattening and levelling out of the language by overuse of standard formulations and oversimplification (*two weeks* instead of *a fortnight*), the anything-goes attitude towards language and the growing tendency for poor compromise, the ensuing imprecision and inability to express one's intention precisely and eloquently, the "pidginisation" of the English language, the loss of language as a cultural token of identification and that of the capacity for intelligent play with language, all of which were felt to reduce language to a mere means to an end ("as long as everybody understands me").

Interpreters, many of whom chose the profession for the very joy of the language, prefer native-speaker conference participants because it gives them great pleasure when native *speakers* "play their language like an instrument" or when a native-speaker *audience* offers them "golden opportunities" to "exploit their repertoire to the full" and to see their "successful solutions and idiomatic phrases understood and appreciated". Similarly, interpreters adhere to high standards regarding their English language competence. According to my survey, 53% of the respondents strive to be as native-like as possible and another 25% consider it paramount to maintain a solid B language level (cf. Albl-Mikasa 2010, 131).

With the increasing influence of ELF on their work, interpreters can no longer pull out all the stops, but have to bid farewell to those "golden opportunities" where they can present their idiomatic delicacies ("idiomatische Leckerbissen", Stähle 2009, 171) and take a dip in the well of linguistic means of expression. In fact, their whole attitude will have to change. Yesterday's diva and today's language professional must become tomorrow's communication facilitator and service provider (This is recognised and expressed by interpreters in a growing corpus of, at present, 10 in-depth interviews and 80,000 words that I am in the process of analysing with a view to the interpreter's competence building and life-long learning).

What does it mean to facilitate communication? In the context of ELF communication, accommodation and collaboration are seen as the decisive ingredients as non-native speakers increasingly outnumber native ones. According to Hülmbauer, Böhringer and Seidlhofer "capacity for *accommodation* is likely to emerge as a crucial factor for communicative success" and "the communication process is based on *collaboration* in which all interlocutors are continuously and actively involved" (2008, 32, my emphasis). When it comes to interpreting quality or "[w]hat makes a good interpreter" (cf. Pöchhacker 2002, 99), we may follow up on a similar (email) comment (on my 2010 paper) by ELF researcher Anna Mauranen:

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After all, the good communicator today is one who can cope with the variety of Englishes we find around us - and accommodate to them! Clearly, the whole idea of “quality” and “standards” was seen in a very traditional, even narrow way, with the educated native speakers as the gold standard [...]. The question is what sorts of professionals do we need [...] [certainly] not [those] of the traditional kind where perfect monolinguals want to communicate with other perfect monolinguals from different languages.

There seems to be some intuitive awareness to this effect amongst interpreters: my respondents made a point to stress that accommodation in the sense of tuning down their English was not to be mistaken for lowering quality standards. For the overwhelming majority, slackening standards were simply beyond question (Albl-Mikasa 2010, 138). Offering accommodation is seen as a token of quality, because it involves investing special effort for the production of tailor-made, simple English that aims to cater for conference participants’ special communicative needs.

In this way, *accommodation* and a cooperative or considerate attitude may be seen as an integral part of “good interpretation”. *Collaboration* in this context means that the interpreter has to shift between speaker orientation (i.e., full representation of the original speaker and their interests and intentions, cf. Gile 1991, 198) and special adaptation to the non-native listener. As a result, the interpreter has to enter into yet another decision-making process as to whom (speaker or listener) to do justice to at which point in time, and where to direct and channel resources. Such functional and context-dependent communicative steering may thus become an important part of the optimisation process addressed in the literature (see the introductory remarks).

### 4. *By way of conclusion*

Today, for professional interpreters to deliver good quality they must be able to adapt to the “imperfect multilingual”, be they source-text producers or target-text recipients. Moreover, they must take a cooperative attitude because communication among non-native multilingual speakers works best as a collaborative enterprise. This means that the conference (just like the community) interpreter becomes more of a mediator in the true sense of the term and less of a neutral voice. Rather than translating between languages, interpreters mediate between language levels. In the case of non-native speakers, they will have to invest additional resources in the comprehension phase to compensate for linguistic shortcomings. In the case of a non-native audience, they may have to adjust to the listener. In the case of non-native speakers *and* non-native listeners (e.g., Polish, Scandinavian, and Dutch conference participants in a German event with a Ger-

man–English interpreter), they will have to carefully balance available resources *between compensation and accommodation*.

Having said that, one needs to bear in mind that from a sociological (and cognitive constructivist) point of view, speakers, in accommodating their interlocutors

cannot but rely on their own image of their interlocutors [...]. Hence they do not necessarily accommodate to the communication needs of their interlocutors, but to their own ideas of these needs (Coulmas 2005, 63).

The interpreter's perception of how best to accommodate to the listener may or may not be in line with this listener's own expectations and needs. This is particularly the case in lingua franca situations where it is even more difficult to ascertain the needs of addressees who come from the most varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. At worst, they may view the interpreter's accommodation effort as a patronizing attitude. On the part of the interpreter, on the other hand, it is not at all clear *to what extent* she feels inclined to accept accommodation to the non-native speaker as a professional requirement of her performance as she would accept quality criteria such as sense consistency, terminological adequacy, a professional attitude, and so forth. Empirical studies are needed to look into the needs of non-native conference audiences, on the one hand, and interpreters' self-perceived professional standards in settings where the interpreter's A and B languages do not match the speakers' and listeners' native tongues, on the other.

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