The 'Role' of the Community/Public Service Interpreter

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There have been a number of terms used to describe the role of the interpreter. Roy (2002) discussed the metaphors and descriptions that have been used in the USA: 'helper', 'conduit', 'communication facilitator' and 'bi-bi' (bilingual/bi-cultural)[1]. In the UK, interpreter trainers are forever reading essays which state (as a matter of fact) that the first 'professional' interpreters, the welfare officers, were 'paternalistic' and that the current model of interpreting is based on the aim of empowering the interlocutors. As early as 1991, Baker-Shenk explored the notion of the interpreter as 'ally' and, at the first Critical Link conference in Ontario (1995) …

> "The centrepiece was a stirring debate on the role of community interpreters, with articulate and sharp divisions between those favouring a role of strictly language transfer, and those favouring an activist and advocacy role to overcome racism, prejudice and underservicing that beset clients not proficient in the dominant language"
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> (www.criticallink2007.com)

Amidst this confusion - some of it, perhaps, brought about by muddled and unclear definitions of role, ethics and professionalism - students of interpreting ask for clear guidelines on how they should act when interpreting. What are the rules? What is one 'allowed' to do and what is 'outside' the interpreter's role? And, it would seem, there is no shortage of organisations, authors and trainers happy to oblige: associations of interpreters publish Codes of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Practice (often confusing the two); some text books are emphatic;

> Let us say clearly that the interpreter interprets everything. This means when the hearing participant is interrupted by a telephone call, the interpreter translates the audible portion of the call (…) When the deaf students are having a bit of a gossip during the lecture, the interpreter voices their side comments.
>
> (Frishberg 1990: 68)

… and students leave undergraduate courses, at least in the UK, armed with rules about where to sit during an interaction, what is allowed and what isn't.

This prescriptive/proscriptive approach, it is argued, is to uphold the right of Deaf people to 'full' communication and to empower interlocutors by minimising the impact of the interpreter. The strategies that some trainers suggest that we follow to accomplish these laudable goals often, though, have the opposite effect. We would suggest that, rather than empower, the approaches taught can often lead to the de-skilling/disempowering of at least one of the interlocutors.

Let us start by examining just one of the presenting problems, or symptoms of everything not quite working as it should. Many of our students – all working interpreters - report that Deaf interlocutors seem to lack confidence in them and try to lip-read to check that they are interpreting 'accurately',

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[1] For further discussion of the relationship between roles and models of interpreting, see Lee (1997).

and that this inhibits their freedom to reformulate. Reformulation is an essential part of the interpreting process. Two languages are rarely similar enough in structure for the form of the source message to be retained and even a nod in the direction of Skopos Theory (Vermeer, 1989) will dictate that utterances are redesigned to take account of their function and the characteristics (knowledge, etc.) of the audience. Politeness Theory and the maintenance of *face* (Brown & Levinson, 1987) dictates, for example, that many statements and questions are, particularly when working from BSL to British English, changed from direct to indirect speech.

Why, then, should Deaf interlocutors not have faith in the interpreter's skills? The interpreter is, usually, a native speaker of the spoken language so he or she should be able to phrase the target message so that it reflects the intended meaning, including nuances, of the source sign language utterance. Or is it more that they are not sure that the interpreter has fully understood the signed source message? From our observations of newly recruited postgraduate students participating in dialogue interpreting exercises, the problem appears to be two-fold.

The first is that they attempt to leave an artificially long time-lag before interpreting an utterance. The deaf interlocutor starts to sign but nothing happens; the interpreter is simply watching and the hearing interlocutor is left, uncomfortably, 'out of the loop'. When the interpreter does eventually start, the overlong time-lag will mean that he or she must continue speaking long after the Deaf person has stopped signing. Now the Deaf interlocutor is out of the loop, wondering what is being said by the interpreter and whether it matches what was originally signed.

Roderick Jones, who has for many years been a staff interpreter and trainer for the European Union, notes that the question of *when* the interpreter should start speaking is ...

> "... a point of practical psychology. The interpreter should say *something* almost immediately, in order to reassure the participants listening to them."
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> (Jones 1992: 72 – his emphasis)

Where has this notion of an artificially extended time lag come from? Cokely (1992), in his research into interpreter miscues, compared average time-lags of two and four seconds. The finding that interpreters with a longer time lag, i.e. an *average* of four seconds, produced fewer miscues has led some trainers to assume, erroneously, that an even longer lag with result in yet fewer. The optimum, some of our students have been taught, is eight, and they were told to practice extending their lag until they felt comfortable being that far behind the speaker. Why? There is no evidence to suggest that an artificially long time-lag helps and, in fact, an over-extended lag is likely to interfere with the efficient use of 'working memory' (Baddeley, 1986) by unnecessarily triggering the rehearsal loop and hampering the listener's ability to effortlessly understand the source message (Llewellyn-Jones, 1981). In effect, it turns the first part of the interpreting process into a counterproductive memory/recall exercise. Cokely himself (personal communication) has never suggested that extending the time-lag beyond that which allows for the processing of a unit of meaning is in any way useful.

Conference spoken language interpreters are trained to reduce time-lag to a feasible minimum. Jones (1992) explains that too long a lag increases the risk of the interpreter forgetting essential

elements of the source utterance and preparation should lead to anticipation (prediction) which allows the interpreter to keep fairly close to the speaker. When discussing how long an interpreter should wait before beginning to interpret an utterance (time-lag), he maintains that...

> "... the answer cannot be given in terms of time: 'Stay x seconds behind the speaker' (we could add that, even if we wished to pin things down in terms of seconds, everything moves so fast in simultaneous that the time-lag would sometimes be less than a second and would practically never exceed five seconds: five seconds is an eternity in simultaneous."
>
> (Jones 1992: 77)

As the interpretation progresses and, consequently, the probability of what is likely to be said next narrows, interpreters will, occasionally, find themselves finishing phrases before the speaker has. (We have all experienced finishing off our conversational partner's sentences. This is a wholly normal occurrence in any communication event.) But what, students ask, happens if the interpreter's prediction is wrong? Jones (ibid.) goes on to explain the strategy of 'garden-pathing', bringing the target utterance round to encompass what was, as it turns out, actually meant; a seamless repair[2].

Sometimes a longer than usual time-lag (i.e. the time between the expression of a proposition in the source language and its rendition in the target language) is necessary to deal with, for example, difficult concepts or complex lines of reasoning. The issue then is the *perception* of lag. An experienced interpreter will use strategies to minimise this perception, e.g. the judicious use of fillers, repetition, etc., so as not to distract the interlocutors by drawing attention to the process. (This 'normalising' of the interaction has nothing to do with 'role'; it is, simply, part and parcel of interpreting.)

The self-inflicted memory/recall task brought about by *artificially* extending time-lag might, in part, account for the rather strange look of concentration that some interpreters exhibit. When in a signed or spoken conversation, we don't, typically, assume a furrow-browed stare. Instead, our faces reflect what is being said by showing interest, surprise, understanding, amusement, sympathy, etc. And this brings us to the second problem. When interpreting, students tend to stop communicating normally.

Communicative competence includes the ability to back-channel appropriately to show that one is understanding and is interested in what a party is saying. We do this intuitively during conversations and we all know from experience how hard it is to converse with someone who doesn't react to or engage with what we are saying. The use of, for example, phatics to show that we are listening and understanding is a crucial part of interactional dynamics. In her commentary on research conducted by Rosenberg (2002), Sandra Beatriz Hale notes that:

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[2] Many students have been taught on their undergraduate courses that they must always own up to making a mistake by saying 'interpreter error' (cf. Stewart, Schein & Cartwright, 2004: 149), According to Jones (1992), in conference interpreting, an interpreter should never draw attention to the interpreting process as this serves only to distract the listener. We would maintain that the same applies in most interpreted community/public service interactions (except when explicitly required, e.g. in legal or mental health settings).

"The results of this study demonstrate that in a face-to-face triadic interpreted exchange, the interpreter produces utterances other than direct interpretations over 50 per cent of the time. Although interpreters themselves may be aware that this is the case, quantifying the different utterances can be illuminating. Phatic expressions, clarifications and repetitions have been identified in other studies as normal aspects of dialogue interpreting."

Hale (2007: 213)

In three-way sign language conversation exercises, new students have little trouble back-channelling appropriately to signal understanding, agreement, etc., as well as to, conversationally, check their understanding and clarify ambiguities. (It is almost impossible to hold a conversation of more than a few minutes without there being utterances that require clarification or at least a request for more contextual information so that understanding can be achieved. Because we do this naturally through back-channelling it usually goes unnoticed by the participants.) When the practical exercises change to dialogue interpreting, though, the students' communicative behaviours also change. When required to interpret the signed utterances of the 'Deaf' interlocutor, the interpreter typically adopts an expressionless posture and all back-channelling stops. For the first few seconds the interpreter says nothing and just looks at the 'Deaf' person. When he or she does start to speak the expression doesn't change. At the end of the signed utterance the interpreter carries on, still with no facial expression, while the 'Deaf' participant waits. The 'Deaf' interlocutor, in this situation, only knows that the 'interpreter' has understood them because they have been able to *hear* the interpretation. In a real-life setting, the Deaf person would have no idea whether they were being faithfully represented or not; which is why, we would suggest, many resort to attempting to lip-read the interpreter.

When asked why her behaviour was so different when interpreting, one student explained that, on her undergraduate course, they had been taught that they shouldn't react to what was being said or signed. The instruction went as far as to recommend that, when interpreting from sign language to spoken language, interpreters should sit with their hands clasped on their laps to minimise the risk of gesturing. This lack of back-channelling doesn't simply leave the Deaf person wondering whether or not they have been understood, it also eliminates the possibility of the interpreter checking understanding and clarifying any ambiguities without halting the interaction. Typically students resort to saying to the 'hearing' interlocutor 'I just need to ask for clarification' and then signing to the Deaf person 'I'm sorry, can you go back?' ... (to where, exactly?) ... or 'I'm sorry, can you sign that again?'.

A Deaf professional who regularly uses the services of interpreters told one group of students that after three or more stoppages of that sort, he loses confidence in the interpreter and is unlikely to engage them again. The same person, after participating in dialogue interpreting exercises with second-year students who had practised back-channelling whilst interpreting, fed back that he was impressed that they had all understood him so easily that not once did any of them need to ask for clarification. In fact, the students had checked their understanding or asked for additional information on several occasions but, because they had done it conversationally, he hadn't noticed.

But what about the 'hearing' interlocutor? As soon as the exercise changes to dialogue interpreting, the chairs are moved. Where, during the conversations, the participants had been sitting equidistant from each other, in a triangle, the 'interpreter's' chair is now moved next to, or sometimes (bizarrely) slightly behind the 'hearing' interlocutor's. Patterns of eye-gaze change. Whereas all of the participants in the conversations had been scanning back and forth between each other quite naturally, the 'hearing' interlocutor now looks only at the 'Deaf' person and, because of the unnatural positioning of the chair, the 'interpreter' finds it difficult to look at the 'hearing' person so also looks just at the 'Deaf' interlocutor. When questioned, students reported that they have been taught to sit immediately next to or slightly behind the hearing person and to instruct them that they shouldn't look at the interpreter, only at the Deaf person. If this is meant to minimise the interpreter's impact on the interaction, sadly it does the opposite.

When we invited postgraduate students from other programmes to join in the exercises as 'naive' hearing interlocutors, they found the interpreter sitting next to or behind them very unsettling (they felt that their personal space was being invaded) and the instruction that they weren't to look at the interpreter very off-putting. They were only allowed to look at and talk to a person (the Deaf interlocutor) who, for the most part wasn't looking at them. Whilst they were talking they were aware of someone flapping their arms in their peripheral vision, then actually talking to *them*, but, again, they weren't allowed to look. As there was no back-channelling, they weren't even sure whether they were being understood. Whilst they all reported that they had been fascinated by the experience, they found it unnatural and, because they had been instructed to break all of the normal rules of conversation and interaction, had felt deskilled and, in one or two instances, embarrassed.

Even interlocutors used to working with interpreters can find certain behaviours difficult to cope with. A good example of Roy's (2000) notion that the interpreter 'is an active third participant with potential to influence both the direction and the outcome of the event' is described by Wadensjö:

> "(...) I interviewed a midwife and pregnant woman after one of their regular encounters, and they both claimed that the interpreter's formal style had made it hard for them to talk and laugh as they had done before, when assisted by another interpreter. The midwife reported that she and the mother had started enthusiastically, but the interpreter's style had made them lose interest in communicating. They had read his dry and formal tone of voice as displaying a lack of interest."
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> (Wadensjö 1998: 284)

In anything other than very formal/adversarial settings, participants will, to a greater or lesser degree, want to converge, i.e. attempt to lessen social distance by reflecting each other's speech styles, vocabulary choices and, even, posture (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1987). This *accommodation* is an essential element of social interaction. Interlocutors signal that they want to identify with each other; that they want to 'get on'. The less formal the setting, the more people tend to converge. Alternatively, interlocutors may want to maintain a certain social distance, e.g. in a tutor/student discussion, or, even, *diverge*, i.e. signal that they don't want to identify with the other person(s) there, e.g. in an adversarial exchange. How though, do interlocutors signal their desired level of accommodation when they don't speak the same language and have to rely on conversing through a third party? The presence of any third party who isn't directly participating in

the communicative exchange will inhibit the convergence of the principal interlocutors and, as illustrated above, a third party who behaves differently from the other participants will, inevitably, stifle the opportunity for a successful interaction. (Some of our students have been told that it is unprofessional to laugh, even if the other participants are laughing!)

So, how should a community interpreter behave? Our experience as interpreters, trainers and assessors has convinced us of one thing; the interpreter can only lessen his or her impact on an interaction by behaving 'normally'. How one interpreter would act in a certain setting with certain participants will, necessarily, be different from the way another interpreter would act. A middle-aged, male interpreter will be perceived very differently from, say, a young female interpreter and, consequently, the participants' expectations will be different. An older person might be perceived, in some settings, as an auditor (Bell, 1984) and that could well have an inhibiting effect on the interaction. The only way to lessen that effect is by behaving in a way which complies with the norms of that type of interaction. Any abnormal behaviour would be a serious distraction and seem, for no reason, to fly in the face of Grice's (1975) notion that conversation is rooted in cooperation. If greeted in a friendly, informal way, one must respond in a similar manner: not to would be considered rude. If asked one's name in a group activity, one would be expected to give it. Not to would appear churlish. To refuse to answer a question about how long one has been 'a signer' would be categorised by Brown and Levinson (1987) as a face-threatening act. How to cope with it in a face-preserving way without assuming the role of a principal participant will depend on the circumstances. Put simply, if the interpreter is not prepared to converge (as and when appropriate) with the interlocutors, the interlocutors are unlikely to be able to converge with each other.

So what do the above examples tell us about the role of the interpreter? We would propose that the interpreter is there to enable two or more people who don't speak or sign the same language to communicate in a way that they would *want* to communicate. Full stop. How this is achieved depends entirely on the setting, the interlocutors and their goals, and the communicative competence of the interpreter. There cannot be one right approach to all interactions. To talk of 'stepping out of role' is to miss the point. Interpreters are human beings with specialist communication skills and one can't step out of being a human being. Is it possible that the notion of 'role' is simply a construct that interpreters have hidden behind to avoid their individual responsibility for professional decision-making?

If there are no clear rules to follow, what is there to regulate an interpreter's behaviour? What ensures that the interpreter always acts professionally? The answer, we would suggest, is *integrity*.

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