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Una comparación y contraste pormenorizado entre la Traducción Escrita (TE) y la Interpretación Simultánea (SI). Las diferencias son mucho mayores y más numerosas que lo que aparece en la superficie. Se destacan, y, de ser necesario, se ilustran unos diez problemas poco explorados. Esos problemas o bien no surgen en el contexto de TE, o bien no existen, pero son problemas para los cuales los traductores disponen de remedios a su alcance, entre los cuales el tiempo y una visión sinóptica del material. De allí que los resultados de SI no deben ser evaluados, como se suelen, según los mismos criterios que los que se aplican a la TE.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Simultánea, Escrita, Multilinguismo, Idioma «Alterno», Dinamicidad, Material.

Scripta manent, verba volant. Written translation and simultaneous interpretation–siblings or distant cousins. An exploration of some less apparent differences

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A detailed comparison and contrast between the work of Written Translation (WT) and Simultaneous Interpretation (SI). The differences are far greater and more numerous than the surface similarity would suggest. Ten or more relatively unexplored problems specific to SI are identified and, where necessary, illustrated. These problems either do not arise in a WT context, or do exist, but are ones for which translators have readily available remedies, not least, time and a synoptic view of the material. Hence the results of SI should not be evaluated, as they have tended to be, according to the same criteria as WT.

KEY WORDS: Simultaneous – Written – Multilinguality –«Other Tongue» – Dynamicity – Material.

Among casual observers, the failure to distinguish meaningfully between the functions of written translation and simultaneous interpretation arises from the power of the surface similarities to occlude the important differences between them. That this misperception is widely held is revealed by the almost universal habit of indiscriminately labelling practically anyone who mediates in any way between two languages as a «translator». It is only inside the United Nations and other major international organizations that the distinction between interpretation and translation is administratively and functionally important, but it is not *just* for bureaucratic convenience that all major international organizations strictly separate the two functions.

Indeed, a closer inspection may reveal that the differences are more significant and more numerous than the similarities. This topic deserves particular attention if only because one effective way of illuminating a phenomenon for a particular audience or reader, is to compare and contrast that phenomenon with another with which it has common features and with which that audience or reader is familiar, e.g. cricket with baseball, the oboe with the flute, horses with camels, and mushrooms with toadstools..

Ultimately, the audience that this message — and its implications — needs to reach is that of the clients or «consumers» of the SI product, but first, it is the consciousness of the profession itself that must be raised, together with its analysts, teachers, students, managers and employers.

An important reason for exploring and bringing home this comparison to the «consumers» of the SI product, is that nine times out of ten, complaints and criticisms by consumers are of what they construe as faults or errors of *translation*. Quite often these criticisms are not even legitimate, because the «errors» in question are not actually errors properly so called, but merely equally valid *alternative* translations of words or expressions, rather than translations that the speaker was expecting or would have preferred. Even when legitimate, the complaint or criticism, which would have been entirely valid if the error had been committed in the course of a *written* translation, is the result not of ignorance or negligence on the part of the interpreter, but rather due to the pressures imposed upon the interpreter by the constraints of the medium as well as by the failure of the speaker to understand and appreciate the crucial extra dimension of SI and the basic ground rules which make this medium of interlingual communication even *possible*.[1]

So, using written translation as a springboard for a definition, SI could be described as written translation *minus* all the things simultaneous interpreters do not have the luxury of doing, *plus* all the extra problems they are forced to solve or the techniques they forced to employ, by the constraints of the medium - and we shall see that these are by no means confined to *time* constraints. We shall also see that, contrary to what the casual observer might imagine, it is not just a matter of processing *orally* the same material that a translator might process *in writing*, since there are many things about the material itself (rhetoric, argument, acrimony, incoherence, colloquialism, non-native distortions, incomplete formulations and a host of others) with which an SI is confronted that are crucially different from the kind of material that is likely to be faced by a translator

[1] For these «ground rules», see the author's article: «The other three eighths & the four 'f's» in *The Interpreters' Newsletter* No.9 1999.

in documentary form (composed, edited, formal expository prose).

These factors or dimensions of difference include

1) aurality: that is that the material is «inputted» [if that is a word], via the auditory canal or the ear, and not by the eye;

2) orality: that is, that the product or processed material is transmitted by the voice and reaches the end-user or consumer via the same auditory route;

3) simultaneity: that is the immediacy of reaction demanded of simultaneous interpreters and the severe constraints to which that subjects them;

4) «dynamicity»: the live, «dynamic» nature of the SI medium and working context and the consequent «ricochet» or «feedback» effect, as distinct from the «static» nature of the «translation» context;

5) multilinguality: related to this last factor, but quite separate from it, is the highly underrated and under-appreciated factor of the *multilinguality* of the SI context, as distinct from the exclusively *bilingual* function and operating context of the «translator». Indeed, if it were not for this factor, SI might never have come into being or supplanted Consecutive Interpretation in the first place.

6) Absence of punctuation marks: the absence from live speech of the punctuation marks which were invented precisely because they do so much to «disambiguate» a written text.

7) «Other tongue» use: another «delivery-related» difference, as widespread as it is under-appreciated, is that in almost all interpreting environments to a greater or lesser degree, although not, in principle, in the European Union, statements are not made in the speaker's mother tongue, but in his/her «other tongue» [the non-native, but official language which the speaker uses to make statements]. This may not be an exhaustive list of factors of difference between the two functions, but in this paper I attempt to illustrate them, when they are less than self-explanatory, and explore their consequences for the *sui generis* function of SI.

A critical difference between the task and hence the skills and technique of the interpreter and those of the translator is that the simultaneous interpreter, uniquely, is compelled to break, and constantly break, one of the cardinal rules of good translation, namely, that one should never attempt to translate anything without having read and absorbed the whole sentence, the whole paragraph, the whole page, the whole book, or indeed the whole oeuvre in the case of literary translation. In other words, absorb as much as possible of context in order to and *before* attempting to make sense of content.

Consecutive interpretation shares with translation the advantage over simultaneous interpretation of enjoying a synoptic view of the whole context and thus dictates such a difference of technique on the part of the interpreter as to call on quite different mental faculties. Thus, the SI practitioner must constantly break this rule; and the wider the syntactical or structural divide between the two languages in question, the more often and the more drastically must this rule be broken.

The key problem of SI is not just the one suggested by the name - the problem of *simultaneity,* a big enough problem in itself - but also the fact that the interpreter has no way of knowing how the sentence will end or even in what direction it is heading and must yet very often *commit* him/herself to some actual language or form of words before all the necessary evidence is in - or before «the other shoe has fallen».

In fact, the use of the word «simultaneous» as the distinguishing feature of this form or mode of translation, eclipses or obscures that feature which, at least as significantly, distinguishes SI from all other modes, namely the unique necessity of breaking the «golden rule». It might be healthy to find a word to describe this feature, if only to break the monopoly of the word «simultaneous» and dispel the misimpression it creates that «speaking and listening at the same time» or «division of attention» is the key or indeed only feature or dimension that makes it different from other modes or species of translation. This is by no means the only, or even the most significant, difference between the task of SI and written translation. Provisionally, for want of a better title, I suggest «One Shoe Interpretation» [derived from the expression «waiting for the other shoe to fall»]. This feature, unique to SI, of having to break the «golden rule» is, of course a *consequence* of simultaneity but still remains independently and *unresolved* even *after* the trick of «speaking and listening at the same time» has been mastered.

The impact of the 'syntactical gap' factor on SI varies according to the *syntactical distance* — of which the chief surface feature is word order — between the languages of a given pair.

A rough and ready, and non-exhaustive, ranking of some major international language pairs in terms of the width of the «syntactical gap» would be:

Chinese — any W.European language
Russian — any W.European language
German — English
Spanish — English
French — Spanish

The syntactical gap between Spanish (S) and English (E) is not as great as between Russian (R) and the major Western European languages and cannot be ascribed to one fundamental factor [wealth of inflexions] as in the case of (R). There are, however, some major identifiable causes. Whereas (E) is a strictly «subject, verb, object» (SVO) language, (S) is much more fluid and often prefers OVS or other patterns such as «absolute» constructions which appear to be modelled on Latin originals, but without the Latin inflections which make the syntactical connections clearer. E.g. When a Latin sentence starts with the object, it is marked as such by the accusative case; when a (S) sentence starts with the object you are left guessing — especially if you are doing SI! — until all the evidence is in, except in the case of persons or quasi persons which are marked as the object by the preposition «a». Another syntactical pattern which causes problems for SI is the frequent use of passive, impersonal or reflexive forms of the verb to begin a sentence e.g. «se pretende...que...» Another is the frequent use of the pattern of a subordinate clause introduced by a conjunction, usually «que» and followed by a verb in the subjunctive, a pattern which cannot be duplicated in (E) e.g. «Querer que...» Another is the reluctance of (S), unlike French (F), to use pronouns with verbs. This is particularly vexatious in a language which already has quite enough ambiguity between the 2nd and 3rd. persons so that the harmless looking «su casa» could mean «his», «her», «its», «their», or «your house». The combination of these factors frequently makes it difficult for interpreters into (E) —and other languages — (to use a phrase made famous or infamous by Lenin («*kto kogo?*») - to know who is doing what to whom in a (S) sentence.

Another syntactical pitfall is the failure of (S) to distinguish between the use of «que» as subject or object in relative clauses, where (F) has had the good sense to assign one function to «qui» and the other to «que». The 'inflection' factor is especially troublesome between Russian and English because, while Russian is particularly rich in inflections, English is particularly poor, not to say penniless. Strangely enough, in terms of 'inflectionlessness' English is much closer to Chinese than to its nearest geographical neighbours *and* relatives. E.g. How many different 'words' or word forms do you need to know to be able to use the adjective голубой /*goluboi* [«blue»] compared with 'blue'? About 36!

As an illustration of how remarkably far (E) has travelled towards becoming a purely «analytic» language like Chinese ©, both from its close relative in the I.E. family, German, and its nearest geographical neighbour and I.E. relative, French, take the verb «walk» and compare it with its equivalent «marcher» in terms of the number of different word forms a student has to learn before being able to make confident active use of the verb - 4 in the case of «walk» («walk», «walked», «walking», «walks»} and some 30-40 in the case of «marcher». (4 tenses in the indicative, plus 2 tenses in the subjunctive multiplied by 6, the number of «persons», singular and plural) – oh!, and don't forget the 4 different forms of the past participle, masculine, feminine, singular and plural!

The loss of inflections by (E) has left word order as the paramount syntactical marker of meaning, so that even in the case of pronouns, where (E) still has a few vestigial inflections, I believe 9 out of 10 (E) speakers would take «him loves she» to mean that the male loves the female *in spite of* the grammatical pointers or inflections.

One of the most profound differences between interpretation and translation is that the former, at least that variety of simultaneous conference interpretation practised in the United Nations and elsewhere, is a performing function. As such, it hovers somewhere between the performing arts and professional sports, both spheres of endeavour having useful analogies to offer with interpretation. To give one example from each, interpreters have to overcome «stage fright», as in the theatre, and also have to cope with fluctuations in form, as in athletics. Neither of these bugbears ever darkens the tranquil threshold of the translator's office... As in the theater, except for the important difference that only their voices are exposed, interpreters have to face an audience. On the other hand, unlike actors, they rarely know their lines before going on stage or even which parts they will have to play. Thus an interpreter's anxiety comes closer to that of an athlete in a sport like tennis, where the player is pitted against an opponent, rather than, say, the high jump, in which the athlete is challenged by an absolute standard of measurement, and is only competing against the other high-jumpers in an indirect sense. As in tennis, there are two variables on a given day: one's own form and the challenge posed by the opponent. The outcome is always dependent on a combination of these two factors. Just as on a given day a tennis player who is off form may still defeat an opponent who does not present much of a challenge, so an interpreter on an off-day may still perform adequately against a speaker who does not pose any great problems but may well be «defeated» by a difficult speaker.

To resort to a different analogy, it may be argued that professional musicians must also suffer fluctuations of form but are rarely defeated even by difficult music. Musicians enjoy, however, two elements of control that interpreters lack: they can exercise some choice in the music they play and, since they have some knowledge of, if not control over, when they play it, they can practise the piece of music as much as they need. Allied to this is the tension factor.

What makes translation difficult is inherent in — and limited to — the text of the material to be processed. Interpretation has at least one other major dimension of difficulty - that of tension. At the endless Security Council meetings held at the time of the 1967 Middle East War, the difficulty of interpreting the then Soviet ambassador Jacob Malik was subjectively far greater than that, years later, of interpreting the statements made at a conference in Los Angeles on small energy sources. There is no question about which of the two kinds of material any translator would have found more difficult if they had appeared in black and white on his desk. It is as if you were to chalk a strip six inches wide by twenty feet long on the ground and walk along it. Are you likely to fall off? Now raise the very same strip fifty feet into the air. Would you like to try it now? Proof of the dimension along which the difficulty lay in the case of interpreting Jacob Malik was the fact that whenever I went to listen to recordings of what he had said, I could never understand why it had seemed so difficult at the time he said it.

LANGUAGE COMBINATIONS

The United Nations has six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. Except in the case of Arabic and Chinese, interpreters are required to interpret from two official languages into a third, which is their mother tongue. Chinese interpreters are required to work back and forth between Arabic and English or Arabic and French. The range of languages into and from which an interpreter works is known as his or her language combination.

Differences between language combinations influence interpretation while leaving the work of translation largely unaffected. Since United Nations interpreters, but not only they, are switched rapidly and frequently from one subject to another, it becomes important to absorb new subject matter and contexts rapidly. Since English is by far the most frequently used of the six official languages, when a team of interpreters is assigned to a meeting with an unfamiliar subject, the chances are that the English interpreters will enjoy the advantage of listening to speakers talk about the subject in their own language and thus of acquainting themselves with the subject before they are required to interpret anything. At the other end of the spectrum, the Chinese interpreters will almost certainly have to plunge immediately into the task of interpreting the unfamiliar material. They may never hear a Chinese speaker talk about the subject and thereby get some clue as to the terminology used in Chinese. Offsetting this factor, of course, is the fact that the Chinese interpreter will be working for just one delegation or delegate who may well not even be listening to Chinese. The English interpreter, on the other hand, is likely to have a large audience totally dependent on him. The French, Spanish and Russian interpreters will occupy a position somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

STRUCTURAL AND OTHER LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

There are inherent structural differences among the various United Nations languages that make it easier or harder to interpret from one to another. But whenever I am asked which language is hardest to interpret, I always reply that variations among speakers far outweigh differences among languages. While Spanish is closer to English in many respects than is Russian, *speakers* of Spanish tend to pose more problems for English interpreters than do *speakers* of Russian. Chinese and Russian diverge significantly from English in structure

and word order: Russian, because it is highly inflected and Chinese, because it is totally devoid of inflections and relative pronouns and is thus front-loaded. Western European languages, especially English, rely heavily on word order to indicate who is doing what to whom. Traditionally, in English and French, although I would not always bet on it in Spanish, in the sentence «Dog bites man», one knows who is biting whom by the word order. Because the case ending will always reveal the subject and object in a highly inflected language like Russian, they can pop up almost anywhere in the sentence. Thus in Russian, and in Chinese for quite different reasons, one of which is the absence of relative clauses, a given sentence can tell an interpreter a great deal about the subject or object, without identifying it. This contrast brings us to the heart of one of the chronic dilemmas of simultaneous interpretation between languages with important structural differences.

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

The interpreter will often accumulate a lot of information about the subject or object of a sentence or a clause before he knows what the subject is or even whether the information will indeed turn out to be about the subject at all. If the interpreter wishes to turn this information into an idiomatic, comprehensible English sentence, he must wait until he recognizes the subject, but he will have to commit himself to that course without knowing how much material he is going to have to accumulate and retain before the subject is revealed. He also runs a serious risk of forgetting or garbling that information, because the interpreter can devote only part of his attention to retaining information, his main focus being an anxious scanning of the horizon for the elusive subject. At the same time, at a different level of attention, work must be going on preparing alternative formulations for the material being retained, depending on what the subject turns out to be.

Alternatively, with confidence and experience, the interpreter can devise a temporizing formula, that is, a way of formulating and delivering a translation of material he would otherwise have the burden of retaining, in such an open-ended or noncommittal way that it can accommodate just about any possible subject without constituting too serious an affront to normal English idiom. A further alternative, again dependent on confidence and experience with a healthy dose of intelligent anticipation, is for the interpreter, like a good bridge player, to play the percentages and supply a plausible subject himself. The benefits are considerable, but so is the risk.

Finally, there is the line of least resistance, that is, an interpreting «technique» which consists in delivering the raw material, totally unprocessed, to the listener and leaving it to him to do the processing, a technique much favored, in the not too distant past, by TASS translations of statements by Soviet leaders. A typical sentence of this kind in Russian might read:

> «(The) having been (undertaken/held) from Jan 9 to 11 1989 in the capital of the Ukrainian SSR, the city of Kiev, on orders from the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, in response to vigorous demands by numerous work units and public organizations, 19th plenary session of the CP of the Ukraine was pronounced a great success».

RELAYING

Another significant difference between the work of the interpreter and that of the translator as well as between different language combinations is that fact of interpretation life

known as «relaying». While there are six official languages, interpreters are required to work from only two languages into a third. In practice, some may work from three languages into a fourth. Although interpreters work in teams of two or even three in the case of Chinese and Arabic, they do so as much to share the volume of work as to share the spread of languages. Typically, of the two interpreters in the team working into English, one will work from French and Russian and the other from French and Spanish, thus leaving Arabic and Chinese unaccounted for. When Arabic is spoken, an Arabic interpreter may render the original in French, which will be «relayed» into English by the English interpreter, or in English, which will be «relayed» into French. In practice, all the UN languages, except English, will at some time be «relayed» into the other languages instead of being interpreted directly.

The effects of this limitation are distributed unevenly among language combinations and interpreting booths. Thus, since, in principle, Chinese interpreters are only required to interpret between Chinese and English, when a language other than English is spoken, the Chinese interpreter will listen to the English interpreter, not the speaker, and will interpret the words of the English interpreters. Chinese interpreters spend at least a third of their time relaying. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the Chinese interpreters stand the English interpreters. In principle, English interpreters only have to depend on relay when Arabic is interpreted directly into French. All other interpreters have to relay from English into their languages whenever Chinese is spoken. Spanish interpreters frequently relay when Russian is spoken, and Russian interpreters sometimes when French and Spanish are spoken.

Relaying is an unsatisfactory expedient both for the interpreter, for whom the experience can be likened to that of a pianist having to play through a blanket spread over the keyboard, and for the listener, who experiences a discomfiting increase in the lag time between the departure of the message and its arrival. Humour and proper names in particular do not travel well through this medium. Thus, if a speech in Arabic is interpreted into French, the English version used by the Chinese interpreter may itself be interpreted from the French version. So far, the United Nations has been spared the most grotesque excesses of this real-life version of the well known party game, but any additional languages will have a multiplier effect on this fact of interpretation life.

IMPACT OF THE CHOICE OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES : MOTHER TONGUES AND «OTHER» TONGUES

Another major, under-appreciated element in the United Nations language environment derives from the original decision, I will not say sin, to designate five, later six, official languages. Among the consequences of this decision is its impact on interpretation. Again, translation is largely out of range of this fallout. If you consider that the United Nations has 191 member states and only six official languages, and that one of these, Chinese, is spoken by only one member and another, Russian, is spoken by only one as a first language, it should not be a surprise to learn that most representatives to the United Nations speak in a language other than their mother tongue. The powers of expression of representatives in their chosen «other» tongue range from near-native mastery to barely scraped acquaintance, which either severely restricts their ability to state their case or makes them close to incomprehensible if they try, or both.

One should also remember that public speaking is a relatively novel function for diplomats whose activities before the rise of international organizations were largely confined to private speaking. Speaking *ex tempore* in public is quite a different proposition from private conversation, and by no means everyone is good at it.

To understand the problems facing interpreters even when they are dealing with speakers using their own language, take a look in cold blood at a transcript of the unscripted parts of a presidential (before and after Clinton) press conference, often printed *in extenso* in the *New York Times*. The casual incoherence that passes muster in political discourse between speakers of the same language can pose excruciating problems for the interpreter, who cannot afford the luxury enjoyed by the listener in the speaker's own language. This listener may half-grasp the speaker's meaning in a blurred, indistinct way and simply wait for it to make sense or dismiss it if it does not. The interpeter *must* convey some meaning, and it must not turn out to be different from the one that may finally prove to be that intended by the speaker.

For example, U.S. President Reagan once replied as follows in response to the question:

> «Do you think there could be a battlefield (nuclear) exchange without escalation into full-scale nuclear war?»

> «Well I would — if they realized that we — if we went back to that stalemate only because our retaliatory power, our seconds or our strike at them after they first strike would be so destructive that they can afford it, that would hold them off».

On 26/10/91, in response to a question about tax cuts at a Press Conference, U.S. President G.W. Bush replied:

> «I think it's understandable when you have a bad - economic numbers come in from time to time mixed I must happily say with some reasonably good ones other people get concerned I'm, but I don't want to do — take — I don't want to say to them they shouldn't come in with concerned proposals».

The size of the problem can be appreciated by multiplying the natural lack of coherence among impromptu speakers of their own language by the factor of imperfect mastery when speakers are compelled to express themselves in a second language or «other» tongue. This casual incoherence would almost never find its way onto a translator's desk in the form of a written document, still less in a language which the author could not really write or have edited by a native speaker.

SOME PARADOXES

One minor paradox of the organization's linguistic heritage is that many representatives from Latin American countries (with the exception of Brazil) who enjoy the privilege of being able to speak their own language at the United Nations can, for social and educational reasons, hold their own very well in English. Other representatives, however, whose native languages are not UN official languages, and who for various historical, geographical and social reasons have not had the same access to one of the official languages, nevertheless have to struggle along in one of them since they cannot speak their own languages at the United Nations.

One of the more bizarre effects of the language dispensation and the way it is so unquestioningly taken for granted could be observed at a closed meeting of the Security Council, when Kurt Waldheim was Secretary-General and Ambassador Florin of the German Democratic Republic happened to be

president of the Security Council. The Secretary-General was presenting a report, using English, as he normally did. A lengthy dialogue ensued between the two, with Ambassador Florin using Russian. After some time, it occurred to me that what had seemed entirely natural because of our conditioning was in fact quite the opposite. Here were 2 German speakers speaking to each other, one in German-accented English, the other in German-accented Russian, through the medium of interpretation, when it would have been much more natural and effective for them to have spoken German to each other. Yet, if one were to ask any intelligent member of the public why we have interpreters at the United Nations, nine times out of ten the answer would be, «so that people who speak different languages can understand each other». How does this square with our living example of how the system may actually prevent people who share the same language from speaking it to each other? There is, of course, a catch to this question.

COGNATE LANGUAGE USE

Paradoxically enough, some of the worst problems are posed by non-mother-tongue speakers who use a cognate or related language, e.g., Brazilians using Spanish, Italians using French, Czechs or Bulgarians using Russian. There are different reasons for this. One may be that people brought up in a small country near or adjacent to a country where a related major language is spoken, tend to believe that their language is similar and that with a little extra effort they could speak and understand the neighbor's language. The net psychological effect of this tradition is that instead of the extra effort, there is reliance on the comforting assumption that they can do it somehow whenever they want. Those who come from a country where a totally unrelated language is spoken know they must make a real effort to speak and understand a foreign language. This phenomenon is a variant of the «Tower of London syndrome». If you live in London, there is no need actually to visit the Tower since you can do so anytime you want. If a foreign friend asks, you may not feel like admitting you haven't been there, and anyway it is almost as if you have been there since you live so near and could do so easily. If you are visiting London from far away, you will almost certainly make the effort to visit the Tower, an effort that London dwellers themselves are far less likely to make. While it may be true that many Dutch actually do speak German, many Bulgarians Russian, and many Italians French, there are many more who believe they do. Whatever credentials a speaker may have for speaking a cognate language in the United Nations, opportunities for confusing his own language with the one he is attempting to speak are much greater than if he is attempting to speak a totally unrelated language. Compare, for example, the problems posed by a Czech speaker of Russian with those of a Mongolian speaking Russian. The range of possible confusion between cognate languages range from vocabulary, grammar, and syntax to pronunciation, phonetics and even stress. Stress is a particularly important feature of spoken Russian, and a Czech speaker of Russian, even if everything else is right, can do a lot of damage with wrong stress alone.

Not all United Nations meetings are political ones attended by diplomats. Some are technical or semi-technical and are attended by experts in the field. In such meetings, the language advantage really tells. Those countries whose language is one of the United Nations official languages can simply send their best available expert. Other countries have to restrict themselves to an expert who can, or claims to be able to, handle himself in one of the official languages.

Some thirty years ago, a virtually monoglot expert on the standardization of perishable foodstuffs represented Spain at a Geneva meeting. Held under the aegis of the Economic Commission for Europe, which at the time operated only in English and French, presentations were to be made in one of these two languages. Either he had persuaded himself and his authorities that he spoke French, or no one had warned him that he would not be allowed to speak Spanish. If he had addressed the assembly in Spanish, even those interpreters who knew no Spanish at all would have done a better job of rendering his remarks in English than the interpreters who knew French very well but had to interpret his version of that language into English.

On another occasion, an Italian expert on housing, building and planning was speaking French, not at all badly, but kept using the word *ajournement*, approximately equivalent to English «adjournment», in the most unlikely contexts. Practically the only thing one can adjourn in the United Nations is a meeting, but this expert wanted to adjourn a host of unlikely things, including documents and reports. This meeting took place not long after Pope John XXIII's Vatican Council, and, although I knew no Italian, I suddenly made the connection between the speaker's *ajournement* and the Italian word *aggiornamiento*, which had been all over the newspapers at the time. What the speaker really wanted to do was to «update» all these things.

One final trivial but illuminating example of the dangers posed by the use of cognate languages is that of the Bulgarian delegate who appeared to be anxious to «reinforce the camps» of other delegates until it became apparent, in spite of the Russian he was using, that his real purpose was the entirely peaceable one of «supporting their positions».

Such examples show that a government would have to be doubly blessed to possess experts in, say, desalination of sea water, who are also expert in an official language.

I would like now to survey briefly some other factors that come into play in simultaneous interpretation which do not ruffle the placid surface of the seas of translation.

1) The whole universe of possible discourse can be divided up along many different coordinates; one of these is a continuum ranging from «context intensive» to «phonetic intensive». At one extreme the simultaneous interpreter is forced to rely heavily on context for meaning and at the other on phonetics. This phonetic intensive end of the spectrum where context supplies little or no clue as to meaning strictly speaking belongs to a large and important category, that of non-semantic or asemantic elements.

2) Non-semantic or asemantic elements.

Figures or numerals, which are notorious stumbling blocks, share a characteristic with certain other types of recurrent material which pose a particular kind of difficulty for SI. This material includes acronyms, proper names, including geographical place names, «third» languages and, to a large extent, technical terms and jargon.

Their common feature is that they lack true semantic content. You may not need much convincing of this when it comes to numerals and proper names, but it may not seem as immediately apparent in the case of technical terms, jargon and «third» languages, because, of course, if they did not have *meaning* you could not look up their *meaning* in a dictionary - and you can. This distinction - between semantic and asemantic elements - is relevant not because of any purely theoretical interest, but because it has a severely practical application to SI. The distinction is best understood in terms of a spectrum ranging from «phonetic-intensive» to «context-intensive». Any of you who have ever struggled to retrieve names and numbers from the indecipherable, protoplasmic, acoustical sludge left on your telephone answering machine, even when the rest of the message makes perfect sense, will have some inkling of the sense of this distinction. And this difficulty, be it noted, exists even when 100% of your attention is available for the tasks of listening and comprehension instead of the 50% available to interpreters.

Let me illustrate this distinction. An extreme example of «context-intensive» discourse would be the announcement of sports results by TV sportscasters. When reading out the results of team sports competition they somehow feel compelled to use and even invent a different synonym of «defeat», «beat», or «win» for each successive result announced, such as: «knock off», «rip», «nip», «blank», «pound», «edge», «drop», «upset», «blast» etc. In cases of this kind, however, the context is so narrow and constricting as to force the meaning «defeat» or «beat» out of absolutely any noise the announcer chooses to make at this point... At the other end of the spectrum there lies another kind of discourse — the «phonetic-intensive» — where the meaning depends almost exclusively on phonetics and context supplies no clue. It is at this end of the spectrum where elements which are not *inherently* or ipso facto devoid of semantic content, such as technical terms and jargon, become asemantic for all SI intents and purposes, because the contextual atmosphere becomes so rarefied as to supply little or no oxygen for the interpreter's brain to work on. Even the most common objects or concepts can become temporarily asemantic in this sense.

Take, for example, any of the many committees on sanctions within the U.N. which, because of the nature of their mandates can be relied upon to throw up this kind of material in its most problematic form. The essence of their work is to review individual cases of «sanctions busting» and to pronounce on the legitimacy of individual items of cargo carried into the territory on which sanctions have been imposed. With lexical items of this nature the interpreter is almost back in the limbo of numerals and proper names where he has to rely almost exclusively on phonetic clues. Paradoxically, the consequences of the failure to grasp and convey this kind of item are, if anything, more damaging and embarrassing than is the case with semantic material. Items such as «black calico for nuns' habits» and «bicycle pump valves» come right out of the blue and disappear promptly back into it. What is happening here is that these words or phrases, while not *strictly* asemantic in the sense that numerals or proper names *are*, become so for all practical purposes once they become items on a list or enumeration. Items on a list are totally devoid of semantic or syntactical links with the other items.

This factor causes an additional and dangerous disruption to normal operating procedure. What some have claimed makes SI possible is the lag between the speaker and the interpreter. What makes the *lag* possible is a combination of factors which includes the interpreter's ability to anticipate and make intelligent inferences from the connected chain of discourse as it sweeps past. The trouble with asemantic elements is that they are not part of a semantically linked chain, but just so many unconnected or loose links which cannot be inferred or anticipated from the speech flow. Phonetic-intensive elements can only be captured if the interpreter is *not* observing the customary lag and is so hot on the heels of the speaker that he can catch and reproduce the actual phonetics of the utterance. If an interpreter is observing the normal lag of a second or two, he will normally have no trouble with a speaker's «...to be held in the capital of my country». But if he is not there to hear the word «Ouagadougou» at the very moment it is being uttered and only arrives on the scene a second or two later, he will find that the phonetic trace has vanished, leaving only the grin on the face of the Cheshire Cat, and all the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe rolled together will do nothing to help him.

The element I have described as «third languages» takes two main forms. The first is the interpolation, by a speaker using one of the official languages of the meeting, of material from another language which may or may not be another official language. One of the most frequent examples of this is the use of Latin quotations or tags. Even if an interpreter happens to have a useful knowledge of that language, he would have to be very lucky to *recognise* it on the lips of, say, a Bulgarian speaking Russian or a Vietnamese speaking French, and even if he did, the chances are that it would in any case be untranslatable, since most Latin tags are highly elliptical and represent the merest tip of the contextual iceberg from which they have been extracted. If you have any doubts, try translating «habeas corpus» or «posse [comitatus]»! Another example is that of non-native speakers of the working language they are using who reach back into their own language, be it official or not, for a telling quotation from some notable political or literary figure of their country. The most frequent and disabling form is that of a speaker who interpolates into his Russian or Spanish sentence a word or phrase, most often in English, without breaking stride to honour English phonetic values, stress or intonation and often leaving it embedded in the grammar and syntax of the language of the sentence.

For example, on 16/3/93 in the Social Development Preparatory Committee, the Chairman (Chile) said: «...sería interesante tener un **fil** acerca de esa reunión...» In the event it turned out that he was saying «feel». At a meeting of the International Civil Service Commission [7/92] the Algerian Chairman, speaking French said: «...on n'a même pas fait un **clear as dandruff**...» It turned out in retrospect that what he was attempting to say was :«clearance draft». On 27/11/92, Russian ambassador Vorontsov at the Consultations of the U.N. Security Council on Angola, speaking of the movement of factions, said: «...а стороны, может быть, «джокинг»[«dzhoking»]...». What in retrospect he appeared to have wanted to say was «jockeying». On a purely phonetic basis, even if the interpreter had detected that it was not a Russian word but in fact an English word, the English word it most closely resembles was «joking». A further complication which is quite common in these cases, is that the word is not used properly, appropriately or idiomatically. «Jockeying» as an idiom has to be combined with the preposition «for» and an object, e.g. «...for power». So here there are at least three strikes against the interpreter, which, incidentally, there would not be for a translator:

1) The switch occurs unannounced, without even the oral equivalent of quotation marks.

2) The phonetics, embedded as they are in their native — Russian — habitat are unreconstructed.

3) The use is, as so often in such cases, incorrect, incomplete, inappropriate or unidiomatic.

Figures or numerals are at particular risk of being misinterpreted or omitted and become doubly asemantic when they come in uninterrupted succession or lists. This risk is compounded by another ill-understood factor. When the interpreters find the semantic flow interrupted by figures and are forced to abandon their lag, their attempts to grapple with them, as often as not unsuccessful, tend to take up a disproportionate amount of their time and attention, with the net result that not only are the figures themselves garbled, mangled or omitted, but the surrounding *semantic* material also suffers «collateral» damage or omission in the confusion.

Concatenations of proper names, including geographical place names, tend to have the same disruptive effect on the semantic flow with the same «collateral» damage to the surrounding «civilian» or semantic population. Speakers, again, would do well to reflect on whether their point can be made only by *naming* the person[s] or place[s] in question rather than using an alternative form of identification, such as « the Ambassador of my country» rather than «Señor García Fernández de Terremoto» or «the capital of my country», rather than Tegucigalpa. An important ingredient in this mix which is consistently overlooked, is that many, if not most, speakers at international gatherings, are not using their native languages. Personal and geographical place names suffer particularly serious distortion on the lips of non-native speakers and since, with names with which they are not already familiar, interpreters have nothing more to go on than what is already a phonetic misrepresentation, the sounds that sometimes reach the «end-user» can be too hideous to contemplate.

Speakers quite often refer to and quote from newspapers and understandably wish to identify the source by name, but it would make a great difference for the purposes of SI, if the speaker, who may be Vietnamese, while speaking French, instead of simply uttering the words «Ren Min Zhi Bao» were to preface it with the words: «the Chinese (or Beijing) newspaper.»

At a tender and vulnerable stage in my own career I was interpreting a Russian- speaking Bulgarian delegate in the 5th. (Budgetary) Committee of the U.N. General Assembly. The item under discussion was Section 10 of the budget, «Printing and Publications». The speaker uttered one sentence of which I understood everything except the subject which was a «U PH O» or «unidentifiable phonetic object». The speaker went on to elaborate on his point, with the English interpreter and hence the whole of the English-listening audience, understanding absolutely everything he was saying - except what he was talking *about*! The «U PH O « in question turned out to be an attempt by a Bulgarian, while speaking Russian, to reproduce his version of the phonetics of the French word «L'Oeil», the title of a U.N. publication at the time. Certainly this is a laughing matter, but not *just* a laughing matter.

Differences in control or mastery of the official language that non-native speakers choose to speak are very great. The strictly linguistic elements which interpreters rely on in a spoken language in order to absorb meaning, range as widely as phonetic values, pronunciation, accent, intonation, stress, grammar, syntax and vocabulary. The more «foreign» a language is to a speaker, who, through no fault of his own, is forced to use it, the less reliable any one or combination of these elements may become. A non-native speaker using English as his working language, for example, may say «w» when he means «v», «offs» when he means «office», his voice may rise instead of fall in the right place, leaving it unclear whether he is asking a question or not, he may say «muddle» and mean «middle», he may say «inter» when he means «enter», or «until» when he means «by»; he may use one tense and mean another or he may say «standard» and mean «switch-board».

3) I would now like to illustrate 2 more separate but interlocking factors, which again do not complicate the task of «translation». One is the «dynamic» nature of the context of live dialogue and interchange and the other is that of «multilinguality».

a) At a morning meeting in Vienna at a time when it was the turn of Spain to act as Chairman of the E.U., the head of the delegation took the floor on behalf of the E.U. and used the expression: « . . .*no vender la piel del* oso *antes de haberlo cazado.»* I was interpreting at the time and happily managed to resist my first impulse, which was to render it as : «Don't count your chickens before they're hatched!» This, of course, is the closest and most idiomatic way of rendering the expression for *written translation* purposes. Instead, I opted for the more literal: «Don't skin the bear before you've caught it!». The afternoon meeting of the same committee may or may not have had the same interpreters assigned to it. It so happened that I was again assigned to that meeting and, sure enough, the worst case scenario that I had instinctively anticipated was actually played out.

The first speaker to take the floor was the representative of Algeria who, speaking French, immediately made a reference to the Spanish saying in question. Happily, probably because the equivalent French expression uses the same imagery as the Spanish, he used the same imagery of «bears» and « skinning».

An interpreter who had not been assigned to the morning meeting would already have one strike against him/her, not having been there to hear the original use of the saying by the Spanish representative. Perhaps in a spirit of post-prandial bonhomie and levity other speakers began piling on to this bandwagon, the Russian, Chinese, Arabic and even other French speakers using whatever varied imagery had come through to them via the interpreters into their languages - to the total bewilderment of any interpreter in the team who had not been there to hear the original exchange in the morning meeting. If, for example, the English interpreter had, reasonably enough, rendered the original Spanish expression as: «Don't count your chickens until they're hatched», English speakers might well have used that imagery in their responses. This in turn may well have been rendered back into Spanish in the context of «chickens» and «eggs» instead of «bears» and «skins», depending on whether the Spanish interpreter in question had been present at the morning meeting to witness the original exchange. The original Spanish speaker, listening to that interpretation may or may not have recognized his original saying in its Anglo-Saxon disguise, depending on his familiarity with English language and culture.

b) Another example dates back to the time of the Soviet Union when a common mode of argumentation was the use of the «*narodnaya mudrost*» [«folk wisdom»/proverb] or quotations from the fables of Krylov, the Russian Aesop.

The U.S representative had described something as a «bugbear».

Later in the meeting the Soviet representative started talking about a медвежёнок, («baby bear»/ «bear cub»), which had clearly been the mistranslation delivered to him by the Russian interpreter, and how such creatures are attracted by honey, to what might have been the total bewilderment of the US representative, who took the floor to make it clear that he had in fact made no references to «bears» of any age.. It is not and cannot be the task of the interpreter, in this case the English interpreter who was rendering the Russian speaker into English, to ease this bewilderment by shoe-horning into his interpretation an explanation of what had gone wrong., especially since he could only, at best *assume or infer* that the problem stemmed from a mistranslation by his Russian interpreter colleague.. Luckily no Spanish, French, Arabic or Chinese speaker was stimulated into responding to whatever version had been delivered to him of the original «bugbear».

These examples, which constitute but the very tip of an iceberg, clearly illustrate the complex extra implications and potential consequences with which these extra dimensions of «mulitilinguality» and «dynamicity» freight the task of the simultaneous interpreter

c) Among the elements which form part of the «dynamic» nature of the SI context is that of visual access to the speaker and his immediate environment. The Presidency of the UN Security Council rotates monthly among its members. On the first day of the Presidency of the Venezuelan Ambassador a meeting of the SC began at 3 pm. The custom is for the incoming President of the month to entertain his colleagues to lunch. As the members straggled into the room after 3 pm. it was clear that there was a certain post-prandial atmosphere of bibulous euphoria and bonhomie- an atmosphere that does not bode well for the task of interpretation. El Presidente finally entered carrying a big carved ebony walking stick - but not speaking softly. His first remarks were about what he called «palitos" or «little sticks» and clearly alluded to some recently shared experience which was, of course, a closed book to the interpreters. It was only after some equally mystifying remarks about something he referred to archly as «galletas de suerte» — if the interpreter could catch the Venezuelan phonetics, since this was a prime example of total reliance on phonetics for meaning — that it finally became apparent that they had all been at lunch in a Chinese restaurant and the «palitos» finally fell into place; he had been referring to «chopsticks». The role and function of the *big* stick, however, remains a mystery to this day. Without the visual access to the stage and the cast, the interpreters would have had even less idea of what was going on.

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