Jokes, swear words and brusque remarks have to be grasped quickly even if they present an extreme degree of linguistic difficulty or have personal or cultural roots. The interpreter needs a “filter” to evoke humor without succumbing to laughter herself. In the case of swear words or brusque remarks, the listener is entitled to perceive the tone of rudeness or anger of the original in order to judge the message for himself.

In a plenary session of the European Parliament, an Irish MP took the floor, quipping, “Thank you Mr. President. You and I have had very good moments on this floor.” (The meeting record notes “laughter”.) The President, who happened to be from Spain, quickly retorted, “¡Señora, si usted y yo no hemos tenido más momentos, fuera de este hemiciclo, será porque usted no ha querido!” [Madame, if you and I haven’t had more moments - outside this room - it is surely because you didn’t want to!]

This anecdote goes to show that double entendres, jokes and brusque remarks hurled about during parliamentary debate are fleeting and must be grasped quickly. And while the example points to a specific set of difficulties that interpreters will encounter in free-ranging parliamentary discussions, it also confirms one of the basic tenets of interpretation: Knowledge of languages is not in itself enough; we interpreters must also have insight into the cultural and even personal dynamics underlying the speaker’s words. An interpreter works not just with words and concepts, but also with ideas and emotions that beg to be freed from the straitjacket of literal translation. And when the interpreter is being propelled forward by the non-stop demands of simultaneous interpretation, all of her imagination must be on call to surmount any challenges that unexpectedly crop up.

Jokes and swear words: The order of the day at the European Parliament

To the interpreters’ great fortune or misfortune, the way humor and pointed remarks are used in the European Parliament differs in both style and frequency from other international forums.

The difference in style is due to the nature of (democratic) parliamentary discourse, which, by definition, is free and open. MPs can – and do – resort to any rhetorical recourse that comes to mind to argue and convince, stretching the possibilities of language to the limit.

As members of plurinational political groups, Euro MPs constantly work and travel together, and even cooperate across partisan lines in order to build a broad consensus when needing a majority in
the plenary. This system breeds a sense of familiarity among them that is without parallel in any other international body, and therein resides the freer and more frequent use of witty or irate interjections. To find oneself interpreting jokes, swear words or brusque remarks in the European Parliament is by no means a rare occurrence. To the contrary, it is the order of the day.

The danger zone

Translators and interpreters must have a very solid grounding in languages, especially in regard to vocabulary and terminology. But when speakers start spewing wisecracks and invective, we can no longer rely on our mental store of lexical equivalents. This is when interpreters most need supple mental reflexes and familiarity with the idiosyncrasies of the speaker.

"Joke/swear word” situations (allow me to lump the two together for the time being) tend to push word equivalents off the map and force the interpreter to improvise as best he can. These are “danger zones”, each with its own special challenge, which clearly stand out from normal speech patterns. Some of these difficulties will go into the written record and have to be handled by the translators as well. Others will be circumscribed to the floor and the simultaneous (and sometimes consecutive) interpretation.

Jokes and witticisms pose a double difficulty. One is linguistic in nature and is most evident in puns – plays on words that are funny because of the combination and contrast of meaning and sound. Puns are usually untranslatable, except when there is a fortunate acoustic coincidence between languages of the same family. Usually the interpreter can do no more than explain a pun in as interesting a fashion as possible. A case in point, taken from real life: “The next speakers, after Ms. Green, are Mr. White and Mr. Black … and this is not a joke!”

The unforgiving pace of interpretation

A different kind of difficulty arises when witticisms, difficult enough to translate/interpret when they are rooted in language itself, feed off national and/or cultural references that will prove incomprehensible to those who do not share the same cultural space. For example, would it be possible to tell a joke about “gigantes and cabezudos” without explaining what these figures represent in Spain? Will a Spaniard immediately understand a joke about the Dutch “elfstedentocht?”

Even if a joke is conceptually and linguistically translatable, the pace of simultaneous is unforgiving and will often force the interpreter into offering a compressed explanation of the cultural reference, leaving precious little time for the humor itself. The interpreter must be nimble and recognise built-in limitations without being deterred by them. A version that is not as funny as the original may be the lesser of two evils, especially if we consider that jokes are not always that funny even in the original.

The speaker’s right to hilarity

But what if the speaker’s comment does have a strong effect on those members of the audience who understand the speaker’s language? What does an interpreter do when part of the audience bursts out laughing and the rest are waiting for the interpretation to join in the fun? In addition to the linguistic and cultural problems mentioned above, there is another kind of difficulty that I would label purely mental.

This problem can be summed up by a simple principle: The speaker has the right to provoke guffaws in the meeting room and all participants have the right to join in. But the interpreter, who listens directly to the speaker along with those in the audience who will laugh first, does not have the right to laugh. To be capable of communicating the cause of the laughter to the still-silent headset wearers, the interpreter must maintain concentration and erect a rational barrier against the flood of
humor, redirecting it toward his impatient listeners.

At times it is not the intention of the speaker to provoke laughter, as the following example illustrates. An Italian insisted on speaking French when trying to get the President’s attention and be recognised: “Monsieur le président, vous m’avez sautée trois fois!” The President tried to answer, in vain: “Mais non, Madame, vous n’étiez pas inscrite sur la liste des orateurs.” But the MP insisted: “Mais si! Je vous dis, trois fois! Vous m’avez sautée trois fois.”

A translator working at a desk can take the time to enjoy this bit of humor, turning off the Dictaphone to tell a colleague what she just encountered. But an interpreter cannot laugh into the open microphone or allow herself to lose concentration. When entering the booth, interpreters mentally install an “anti-joke filter” that allows us to transmit funny comments without being infected by the contagion in the room. Curious phenomenon indeed!

Oh my goodness!

The linguistic problem is different when it comes to interpreting expletives and brusque remarks. Although different languages do not have the exact same repertory of swear words, they all have basic ways to express anger, annoyance or perplexity. In these cases, rather than looking for a literally equivalent word, one looks for the expression used to convey the same feeling. Take the oft-heard “J****, macho!” in Spanish, which in English has been converted into an appropriately inflected “Oh my goodness!” When confronted with such situations, the interpreter must be confident of possessing both the relevant cultural knowledge and quick reflexes.

When things get more complicated and the speaker doesn’t stop with an isolated vulgarity (e.g. “Se nos echa encima una acojonante avalancha de enmiendas!”), but throws out a whole string of invective, the challenge is to find the appropriate register to faithfully transmit the spirit of the insult or attack. If the interpreter must don anti-contagion gear when faced with jokes, something similar happens with exclamations of anger and indignation.

Heated discussion pulls the interpreter into its rapid current. If it doesn’t, one of the main messages — passion — will be lost. It is the speaker who sets the pace, and in my opinion, the interpreter doesn’t have the authority to adopt a more measured tone that defuses the emotional charge of the original speech. Again, the interpreter must install a kind of personal filter to keep the emotion she must reflect from actually affecting her. A translator, who does not hear the speaker’s voice, who does not see his face nor witness his gestures, will have less trouble maintaining a clear mind.

It is sometimes said that the presence and voice of an emotive speaker speak for themselves, and as a result the interpreter does not need to inject the same emotion in her delivery. I beg to differ. If the listeners see a much worked-up speaker but hear a restrained interpretation, they will not be inclined to trust the interpreter. Also, many conference rooms are so large that direct visual impact is not as great as that made by the voice coming through the headset (interpreted or not). Moreover, in the European Parliament, the “parrot” system pumps the sound (including all interpretation channels) directly into the MPs’ offices, and we interpret with the knowledge that we have listeners who are not actually in the room.

Familiarity with registers

In all the situations described, familiarity with the rhetorical style of a speaker is a huge help. This means knowing if he has a propensity for brusque remarks, being familiar with the register he normally uses, and recognising the signs that the sleeping volcano might be about to erupt and even in which direction the fire may flow. European MPs serve a five-year term, and not only do they get to know each other very well, but the interpreters too have the time to become familiar with the “linguistic profile” of each MP. This knowledge comes in handy when the unexpected or startling
occurs and helps us to provide quality interpretation in a challenging environment.

1 “Gigantes” are giant-sized figures usually made of paper mâché or a similar material, and carried by someone from the inside. “Cabezudos” are oversized heads made of similar materials and supported in the same fashion. Both are popular figures in traditional festivals in Spain.

2 The ice-skating race through the 11 cities of Friesland that is a veritable national event in the Netherlands.

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**Recommended citation format:**