Letter from the Editor: Thinking interpretation

Interpreters know that thought is not always linear and well organized. How often we encountered a chaotic speaker who never makes a full stop before turning right, left or perhaps full-circle … and then speeding off again!

Luigi LUCCARELLI.
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The time approaches to prepare a new issue of Communicate!, articles start coming in and editing work must be done. That sets my mind roiling, a process known to most as thinking, although the random leaps my mind sometimes takes do not always encompass the sense of organisation associated with cogitation.

Thought, however, does not have to be linear and organised. Interpreters know this well: how often have we encountered a chaotic speaker who never makes a full stop before turning right, left or perhaps full-circle … and then speeding off again? Sometimes one feels more like a rodeo bronco rider than a skilled craftsman with tools lined up at the ready. Sometimes we just try to stay on his back for 10 more seconds and hope that we land on our feet and soft terrain.

I tend to think visually – nice for reading maps and such, and helpful in interpretation too: “If you can see it, you can say it.” I’m not sure who said that, but there’s some truth in it. And if you can’t see it clearly, break it up into chunks to help with the digestion.

Of course, thinking about interpreting is not the same as doing it. The former tends to be more reflective or theoretical and goes well beyond the task at hand. Ethics, professional practice, the purpose of a professional association, training, new technologies, language acquisition and improvement – and many other concerns - must not be forgotten.

While I was preparing this issue, I found myself mulling over the question of loyalty. I’m sure most would agree that loyalty is of prime importance. But are we all thinking of the same thing when we hear the word? And besides, loyalty to whom and what?

- The “client” - as in s/he who pays?
- The “client” – as in s/he who listens?
- The speaker?
- The culture of a country – as in prevailing morals?
- The “country” itself – as in the state?
- The language(s)?
- Our profession?

The most recent cause of this bout of meandering mind was an article in the Translation Journal (see
reference in “Interpreting in the News”): His Excellency and his Interpreter. The author, Danilo Nogueira, deserves credit for expressing an opinion on a touchy subject.

Indeed, it is not a simple matter. I came across another article that seems related. The BBC reports that a US union planning to tour factories in China is trying to get assurances that its delegation “will be allowed to bring its own interpreters.” Has that got something to do with loyalty? Or is it just another bargaining chip on the table?

I believe that **one should ask if our code of ethics sufficiently covers the question**. Certainly professional secrecy implies a form of loyalty – to all involved in a meeting as well as to the profession. And what about the imperatives not to “detract from the dignity of the profession” and to “refrain from any act which might bring the profession into disrepute”? Can that be taken to mean that loyalty to a restricted group (e.g. a client or employer) could imply disloyalty to the whole (e.g. to our public or the profession)? Does it mean that an interpreter who censors or accepts to censor content is transgressing a principle? If it doesn’t mean that, do we need a new provision to cover the eventuality? Is the situation the same for freelancer and staff interpreter? In all cases? And how far can or should such reasoning be taken? At a time when “interpreters” are mentioned in connection with “interrogations” and censorship remains alive and well, the question is pertinent.

My musings are but that for now. I would welcome someone taking on these questions in greater depth. A challenging task, perhaps, but one that could potentially contribute much to our profession.
and have a smooth landing.

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