Quality and role: the professionals’ view

"What is quality in conference interpreting?" - "Ask a professional!" That is what H. Bühler did in the 1980s, but hardly anybody has done so since. While surveys on user expectations, including one commissioned by AIIC, have yielded rich findings, no systematic research has allowed conference interpreting professionals to have their say on the matter. Interpreting researchers at the University of Vienna are trying to change this, using state-of-the-art technology to literally give a voice to the profession.

Almost a quarter century ago, Hildegund Bühler first asked AIIC members about quality in interpreting and interpreters. Her data from barely four dozen respondents became something like the backbone of empirical research on quality in conference interpreting, and her findings are still cited as reflecting the quality standards of the conference interpreting profession as represented by AIIC. Indeed, Bühler, who taught translation and terminology for many years at the University of Vienna until her retirement some ten years ago, deserves full credit as a pioneer, not least because her work inspired one of the most prolific and coherent lines of research in interpreting studies, that is, user expectation surveys. Follow-up studies among interpreters, in contrast, have been few and far between. In this article, we will briefly review these developments and the state of the art before describing the survey project we are about to carry out.

A Review...

In the recent literature on interpreting, there is no shortage of articles and book chapters reviewing the development of empirical research on quality in conference interpreting. Rather than yet another review paper, we will therefore offer only a sketch of the situation, covering the last twenty years. More detailed accounts can be found, for instance, in Miriam Shlesinger's summary of the 1994 Turku Conference round-table on the subject, in Kurz (2001) and, in particular, in the contribution to Communicate! by Eduardo Kahane (2000), whose modestly titled paper, "Thoughts on the Quality of Interpretation", in fact amounts to a comprehensive analysis of research on interpreting quality until the turn of the century. What is more, Kahane's paper shows the diversity of vantage points and approaches in the study of quality, and points to the issues that have remained unresolved. Chief among these is the objective assessment of an interpreter's performance. The only consensus reached in this regard seems to be that "it depends...", implying that interpretation quality ultimately needs to be studied "in the field", taking account of as many situational and contextual variables as possible. This is reflected, for instance, in the notion of "quality under the circumstances" (Pöchhacker 1994), in Barbara Moser-Mercer's (1996) definition of "optimum quality", and in the descriptive framework of Sylvia Kalina (2002). Quality is thus assumed to vary depending on a broad range of setting-related constraints.
This variability has also emerged from the impressive array of user expectation surveys that appear to dominate the scene. As mentioned at the outset, this line of work was triggered by Hildegund Bühler, if perhaps inadvertently. Discussing the findings from her survey, she made the assumption that the interpreters' preferences regarding quality criteria also reflected the requirements of the users, that is, of the interpreter's audience. This assumption was subsequently put to the test in surveys among conference participants, often using Bühler's list of criteria (see Kurz 1993/2002, 2001). Colleagues in Finland, Italy, Japan, Poland and Spain, among others, made further contributions, giving rise to an increasingly varied set of findings on what users were looking for, or listening for, in a professional interpreting performance.

In many respects, this line of research culminated in the comprehensive user expectation survey that was commissioned by AIIC and carried out in the early 1990s by a Vienna-based research institute with the help of nearly 100 (!) interpreters who conducted over 200 interviews with users at 84 different meetings around the world. A detailed report can be found on the AIIC website (Moser 1995) and in an extensive article in the journal Interpreting (Moser 1996). Such factors as the size and type of meeting and respondents' age, sex and previous experience with interpreting were all found to impact on the pattern of users' expectations. Indeed, in the face of such heterogeneity, interpreters wishing to tailor their performance to their listeners' expectations would find it hard to know what to aim for, and would need to fall back on their own standards of quality performance. The more you ask (users), it seems, the more different answers you get.

Unlike the user perspective, the view from the profession has been left largely unexplored. Hence our goal of following up on what little work has been done to date, and contributing to a fuller picture of quality from the professional's point of view. Motivation for such an undertaking can be found also in the pages of this webzine. Kahane (2000), for one, acknowledges the achievements of AIIC in safeguarding quality of service through its standards, mechanisms and committees, all of which "would seem to indicate that there is an underlying consensus on what quality is", but goes on to say: "The amazing thing is that there is no such consensus."

As mentioned earlier, Kahane (2000) is particularly concerned with the vexing problem of objective assessment. But the lack of consensus he identifies also holds true for the broader issue of the interpreter's professional mission - as when he suggests that "the interpreter's mediating function is not clear; is it mediation or interference?"

We believe that the question of the interpreter's function and role is inherently linked with the issue of quality, which is why both will feature prominently in our study. This link - between quality and role - has not been addressed in previous research. The two most significant efforts on record are a web-based survey on quality criteria (Chiaro & Nocella 2004) and the comprehensive survey by Claudia Angelelli (2004) on the role perceptions of conference, court, and medical interpreters in Canada, Mexico and the US. Chiaro and Nocella (2004) used most of Bühler's criteria and asked respondents to rank them in an electronic form. Out of some 1,000 interpreters invited to participate, 286 filled in their questionnaire.

Though commendable for its innovative implementation (in late 2000), the study by Chiaro and Nocella suffers from uncertainty regarding the professional background of their respondents, only 44% of whom had university-level training in interpreting. It is not known how many AIIC members were involved in that study.

The survey by Angelelli (2004), on the other hand, was not primarily addressed to conference interpreters. Though she had roughly the same number of respondents as her Italian colleagues (293), only some 107 of these were conference interpreters. What is more, many of these respondents apparently complained that a number of the question items did not seem to apply to them.
Building on these previous efforts rather than reinventing the wheel, our study seeks to combine innovative design and methodological rigor in revisiting some long-standing, fundamental issues of the profession. No better encouragement for this than the Editorial in the previous issue of Communicate!, where Luigi Luccarelli (2008) acknowledges that the world around us is changing with respect to the professions, and concludes: "The time is ripe for a fresh look at who we are, our roles, how we can contribute to a larger community (...) ."

and a Preview

The study we are presenting here is a survey on quality criteria and role issues addressed to the membership of AIIC. It forms part of a more comprehensive project on "Quality in Simultaneous Interpreting" currently undertaken by a team of researchers led by Franz Pöchhacker at the University of Vienna. Aside from the survey, the project aims to study user response in several experiments involving a real audience in simulated communication events. The resources needed for implementation have been granted by the Austrian Science Fund in a competitive peer-review-based procedure.

Given the complexity of the interpreting profession, we could think of a large number of interesting and challenging questions to address to the community. Mindful of fellow practitioners' time constraints, however, our survey is deliberately modest in scope and limited to two major sets of questions, on quality criteria and the interpreter's role. The former essentially replicates the pioneering study by Bühler, while the latter builds on Angelelli's work with a specific focus on the professional realities of (simultaneous) conference interpreting.

We are quite aware that there is a rising wave of questionnaires on interpreting issues popping up in practitioners' e-mailboxes, taxing the patience of even the most cooperative professional. We have therefore done our utmost to ensure that our web-based questionnaire will be regarded by those invited to participate as not just another survey.

- Our questionnaire will be administered using a state-of-the-art survey tool to make participation as easy and convenient as possible while ensuring the reliable - and fully anonymous - processing of large quantities of data.

- As a unique innovation, our web-based questionnaire features an audio sample of a simultaneous interpretation on which respondents can give their opinion.

- Most importantly perhaps, our pretested survey instrument should take no more than 15 minutes of respondents' time.

Invitations to participate in the survey will be sent out in the course of September, and the instrument will be online for several weeks.

We sincerely hope that together - that is, a team comprised of three generations of interpreting researchers at the University of Vienna and as many members of the AIIC community as possible - we will succeed in carrying out a study that is both a significant contribution to scientific research on conference interpreting and a valuable source of insights for the community of practitioners, helping to build more collective awareness and consensus on one of the vital issues of the profession.

References

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