Exploring media interpreting

Interpreting for the media differs from interpreting at a conference, and working for live news programmes brings into play critical factors that must be taken into account. Let’s take a closer look at what’s involved.

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Chikako Tsuruta is a media interpreter who has faced these challenges interpreting ABC, CNN and BBC news programmes in Japan. Vincent Buck has done the same at the Franco-German broadcaster ARTE. They got together online to discuss what it’s all about.

CT: Good morning Vincent. I really appreciate your willingness to discuss media interpreting with me.

VB: You’re welcome. Let me start out by giving you an overview of my work at Arte, which is closer to journalism and localisation than what a conference interpreter usually does.

ARTE started broadcasting about 15 years ago and has positioned itself as a European culture channel. At heart it’s a bi-cultural and bilingual channel jointly funded by the governments and supported by the public broadcasters of France and Germany. The idea was to consolidate a peaceful relationship through greater mutual understanding.

Arte broadcasts, and increasingly webcasts, on two separate audio tracks. It’s available in German in Germany and other German-speaking countries; and in French in France, Switzerland and Belgium. Hosts will speak either French or German, and depending on the programme, this requires either subtitling or dubbing. If the programme is live, it requires simultaneous interpreting.

CT: Are languages limited to German and French? And what kind of programmes are we talking about?

VB: Talk shows mostly, with French and German, but also from other languages depending on the guests. International news is also big, so events like US presidential debates or UK election debates are interpreted live.

The daily news programme, Arte-Journal, has rotating French and German anchors. I’ve been working on the programme with a handful of colleagues for the past 10 years or so, on the evening edition - a 30-minute show with a news section lasting 15-20 minutes. Interpreters are assigned to be the voice of a specific newscaster, and in the main I’ve been interpreting the same German journalist into French for most of my time there.

In a conference hall you always lag a few seconds behind the speaker, but on TV that’s a no-no. When the host stops speaking, he can’t just stand there staring into the camera while the interpreter finishes. Live interpreting on television only works for the audience if the delivery is exceptionally
fluent, the voice trained and steady, the message clear, and the final rendition very much like dubbing.

CT: Could you elaborate on that? What goes into achieving this effect?

VB: Well, preparation is the name of the game. When you’re doing a live presidential debate, obviously you’re on your own like any interpreter, although you always keep in mind the specific considerations I mentioned. And you certainly don’t want to blank out on television – viewers would immediately think there’s something wrong.

Fortunately when you’re interpreting the news regularly, it becomes easier. Anchors read from a script prepared and edited beforehand.

There are exceptions of course - for breaking news the announcer may have to “rip ‘n read”, and as his interpreter I’ll do my best to follow. And in some situations, like an interview, you’ll interpret without a script.

Thankfully, as a newscast interpreter you can prepare, just as everybody in the newsroom does. Reporting is teamwork, and that’s why I consider my job at Arte more like that of a journalist with an eye and ear for language and cultural differences.

The evening newscast is at 7:00pm, but the news team starts working mid-morning, choosing the stories and how they’ll cover them, who will do what with what material, and so on. I usually report around 4pm, have a wee chat with Jürgen, ‘my’ German anchor, and log into the newsroom computer system where I can access the programme’s line-up and where everybody writes their pieces. I focus on the German anchoring scripts, which is what I’ll have to interpret live into French. At 6:30pm we usually have a rehearsal.

The essential part of my work is to write up a French version of the scripts. But there is a twist. I can never do a one-to-one translation because anchoring standards differ significantly between German and French. The former tends to be more austere than what a French-speaking audience is used to, so I have to ginger it up just a bit. Also, French anchors tend to follow the inverted pyramid style of writing with the most newsworthy bits at the top, the important details in the middle, and the general background at the bottom. In German the thought process is more linear and stepwise.

CT: What exactly does that imply for your work?

VB: A really major factor is how familiar I expect a French-speaking audience to be with the story - what I say as the voice of the German announcer must be targeted at them. If it’s a purely German story, say upcoming regional elections, most French viewers will be very unaware of the context, and I won’t bother with some details and names. Instead, I’ll try to find a different angle to sell the same story to them.

The reverse is also true. If it’s a typically French story I’ll have to beef up my lead-in. The German announcer will focus on his audience, providing background, and then only hinting at the underlying story, whereas I can safely expect my French-speaking audience to know what we’re talking about, so I can cut to the chase. The essential thing is to sell the story, and that can only be done by adjusting the message to your audience.

The story itself is delivered in the form common to newscasts: a 2 to 3 minute report with the usual voice-overs and sound bites. At Arte in-house translators translate these reports - on a weekday there are 2 translators each for French and German. Typically the journalist who authored a report will speak in his or her native language, and the second language version will be done from a translation either by a professional speaker or another journalist. Few journalists in the newsroom work in both languages, even though most have a passive understanding of the other. A constraint imposed by the
second language version is that news stories must be recorded before they are aired, as speaking them live in two different language versions would be difficult. In fact, the only live segments of the newscast are the studio portions where the host faces the camera.

In some cases, especially when the newscast turns to the arts, social trends, or “kicker” reports thrown in to lighten things up at the end of a programme, I may choose to turn away from the original German script altogether and do my own write-up if I find that the piece warrants a different rhythm or story-telling for a French audience. Of course, you could argue that the decision to do so is subjective, and, needless to say, it’s not something you do unless you’ve acquired significant on-the-job experience, and know the news team trusts you to do it well.

Of course my scripts get reviewed by a French editor, the same as for anyone else in the newsroom. This is especially important because I may have departed significantly from the German original. Editors will review my copy to make sure it’s factually correct and stands on its own merits, not because they need to double-check with the German version.

CT: You mentioned the importance of preparation. Can you add anything to that?

VB: My “source texts” are never just the original German scripts. I’ll routinely check the news feeds from the big press agencies for cues about the reporting angle in the French-speaking press. I will also google things, read newspapers, talk to newsroom journalists for clarification. I’ve come to realize that the reporting angle on the same story may differ substantially between cultures, even when they share a common border like France and Germany.

CT: How about other ways in which working on a live news program differs from straight conference interpreting?

VB: A major factor is timing and synchronization. I may do my own thing, but the German anchor and I must be in synch. Of course, he’s the lead. If he pauses for a couple seconds and switches cameras, I must pause too. Also, it’s absolutely necessary for me not to overrun the original. Ideally I must finish a second or so before him.

Another things is that the producer will talk to us when we’re off the air during the newscast, telling us that we’re running late and must chop things off, or that we’ve got an extra 30 seconds to fill. The host will decide what to do and tell me about it, if he has time, and I’ll adjust my text as best I can. I can also speak to him directly during filmed reports if anything’s unclear.

As you can see, this type of work is not exactly representative of freelance conference interpreting assignments. Arte has chosen to use interpreters because it works for them. When a programme is live, anything can happen, so you need an interpreter both to shadow the newscaster and interpret when he veers off-script.

That said, interpreting is not a “natural” solution. It always comes at a price, as it may be off-putting to the audience to listen to somebody else’s voice, however hard you try to make it flow naturally. There’s always going to be a slight disconnect when you rely on dubbing or interpreting. Once or twice during the show, I’ll let my French-speaking audience hear a story tag in German when it’s safe to assume that the original will be generally understandable even to non-German speakers. Typically that’s the case when the German tagline contains internationally recognisable proper nouns or words borrowed from French. I will then try to finish 2 or 3 seconds before the newscaster, so that the German original becomes audible again, and ‘my’ audience can make out what he’s saying because it’s a perfect match of what they’ve just heard in French.

As I said, this will not be possible for all scripts, and whenever my version and the German original differ significantly I try as much as possible to speak over the newscaster’s voice. You don’t want your viewers to start wondering why the two versions are apart. Their undivided attention must go to
the message, not the messenger, and even less the messenger’s messenger.

CT: So how different is ‘news interpreting’ from other types of media interpreting?

VB: I would say that interpreting the news on a long-running daily show is totally unlike media interpreting at one-off events. Whenever something big happens – say George W. just declared war on some new country or William and Kate are tying the knot – television networks pretty much enjoy a captive audience. People want to know, and if the fastest way to get the information is through interpreters, so be it. Of course, if it goes on for a while and there are competing networks, each with their own interpreters, viewers may switch to the channel where the interpreting sounds best.

The daily news show on Arte is totally unlike that. Like any other ‘serious’ newscast, our bread and butter is reporting mundane news. It’s important news, but not necessarily riveting. Then, there’s an abundance of competing news channels and programmes for French audiences. Why should they put up with the strained voice or the unfortunate turn of phrase of an interpreter just because Arte has chosen to be bilingual? They won’t. As a newscast interpreter, you really need to perform in a way that will not drive the audience away. I remember a colleague saying interpreters should be heard, not seen. I would say that in good media interpreting, interpreters do not sound too much like interpreters.

Apart from the all-important preparation, your voice is pretty much all you have. Arte organises superb voice coaching seminars for its regular interpreters. I’ve attended a few myself and have enjoyed them tremendously and learnt a lot.

CT: You’ve worked with the same anchor for a long time. What’s that like?

VB: I believe that there must be a good match between the interpreter’s style and voice, and the newscasters’ general demeanour, body language, facial expressions. From the start Arte’s Chief Interpreter Elisabeth Krone recognised that. It’s a factor when casting new interpreters for a ‘role’.

It also helps tremendously if the interpreter can develop a rapport with the newscaster. In my case, Jürgen Biehle is a joy to work with and an extremely empathetic personality. My tone, pace and colour will intuitively be influenced by his voice and mood, which are always spot-on. Also, I personally see it as part of the job description for a conference interpreter to be a temporary vehicle for the speaker’s habitus (with exceptions), in addition to the technical work of interpreting one language into another. I find that even more important when interpreting the news, where insight and empathy are probably the single most important skills that an interpreter must have.

As a rule Arte casts all its interpreters according to the speaker’s gender. I would only very exceptionally interpret a female guest, say if nobody else were available. Also, Arte’s language service bends over backwards to make sure that an interpreter is always assigned a single speaker on any given programme. That also helps mitigate the inevitable disconnect that live interpreting creates for the target audience. The credit for that also goes to Elisabeth Krone.

CT: It sounds like multilingualism is the core identity of Arte.

VB: Yes it is. Or at least biculturalism as evidenced by a dual audio track, systematic subtitling, dubbing or interpreting. This does not mean to say that it’s an easy proposition to maintain. Arte’s been labelled elitist by some. And some insiders hold the view that interpreting is too much of a drain on the viewers. But then, how do you convey biculturalism with a European perspective, as Arte claims to be doing, without subtitling, dubbing, and live interpreting? You must put your money where your mouth is.

CT: So what are the essential qualities of a good media interpreter?
Being extra quick on the ball helps tremendously. If you’re doing news interpreting, you must definitely be a news junkie. A good voice in all circumstances is essential. Then, you must learn to adjust your delivery and style to stay in sync with the speaker no matter what happens. When you’re interpreting from German into French, this may require that you chop the rendition into smaller, more manageable bits. You don’t want to wait for the verb. It also helps pep up your delivery.

You must also take care of yourself. You need to get a good night’s sleep, alcohol is a no-no, and coffee is definitely not recommended two hours before you go on the air - your mouth will dry up and “click”. I tend to have a sweet tooth, but I try to avoid sugar and carbs before a programme. Sugar will boost you up, but the risk is that your sugar levels will plummet during the programme, affecting your energy and voice.

Media interpreting can also be a high-risk occupation. Anything can happen. The audio feed may be sub-standard or drop altogether. Your assigned speaker may end up speaking a language no one knows. Sound engineers with little media interpreting experience may suddenly decide to mix your voice with the original sound track and feed it back to your earphones when you’re interpreting. A junior producer may bump in on the sound track when you’re interpreting and ask you to clarify a concept for the audience, or to tell you how well you’re doing, only to realise later that he made you miss 10 important seconds of the original speech. You may not have a booth, or have to make do with bulky over-ear headphones that make monitoring your own voice nigh impossible. Your console may not have an ON button because the engineers decided they would turn your mic on for you, so you never know when you can clear your throat or take a sip of water. Or you may not even have a console but a hand-held mke, and no headphones, only a loudspeaker next to you. I’m not making any of this up - it’s happened to me, though not on Arte because everybody there is so used to media interpreting that they know how to get the best from it.

CT: What about quality control? Are interpreters evaluated regularly?

VB: Only a handful of colleagues do news interpreting at Arte, and they’ve been doing it for many years. Occasionally we may be invited to attend a voice coaching seminar, where the coach will listen to what we’ve done recently and make recommendations. I understand that interpreting is also assessed as a factor influencing ratings whenever Arte commissions quality surveys. The match between a newscaster and his or her voice in the second language was mentioned spontaneously as a factor by some viewers. Personally, I always listen to the broadcast again when we’re done, to check whether the voice was OK. Also, each newscast ends with a debriefing session in the newsroom where, in addition to the day’s reporting, interpreting may be commented upon.

CT: Apart from news interpreting, what else do you do at Arte?

VB: I also do other media interpreting work for Arte, including voice-overs. Traditionally we would report to Strasbourg, get a preview of the programme, jot down a few notes, go into the booth, and start interpreting under the supervision of a colleague and an audio engineer.

But recently Arte’s language service has been spearheading a do-it-yourself system for voice-overs. It’s a new job altogether, where you’re supposed to be a translator/localiser + interpreter + voice-over actor.

Here's how it works:

- I stay at home in Brussels.
- I download a big video file (up to 5/6 minutes) from Arte’s FTP server.
- I play it and take notes, consecutive-like.
- I do a first rough interpretation into a high-quality mic using text recognition software.
I edit my translation and test it for synchronisation with the original.
I fire up my audio editing software (ProTools), disembed the original soundtrack from the video stream, and create a blank track for my French translation.
I speak the translation into the mic. The audio gets recorded by the editing software.
I check the output and edit as appropriate (move or stretch bits of translation backward or forward, fade out noise, and generally clean up the piece).
When I'm happy I FTP the file back with my French translation track.
Arte plays the piece for quality control and dispatches it to a server where it'll be picked up automatically, processed, and streamed in German or French on their website.

Of course, this is never going to be full television broadcast quality, and Arte knows that. So currently such do-it-yourself voice-over work is only meant for webcasting, and for pieces not exceeding 5/6 minutes.

But this raises several questions that are, I believe, interesting for professional conference interpreters:

The profession is changing in ways that require interpreters to wear several hats (translator/localiser, voice-over artist, self-managed audio engineer working with highly specialised software).

What I was taught as an interpreter (technical accuracy) is much less important than proper story-telling, cultural empathy, liveliness and voice management, in effect all-round communication skills.

Technical skills, especially a proper understanding of audio engineering, are a pre-requisite.

There's no escaping the computer. It's there every step of the way.

I tend to look at this as yet one more thing that I'll enjoy learning and doing as professionally as I can. Most likely this is not a market for all interpreters, but I have a strong hunch that this sort of work will not be for television networks only, but also for large international organisations with a web presence. -

Note: Since this conversation took place, Arte has discontinued the news programme described above. The last newscast with interpreting was aired on January 1, 2012, on Vincent Buck’s shift. The channel now broadcasts separate monolingual news programmes in French and German.

Recommended citation format: