Interpreting: A communication profession in a world of non-communication

New technologies, poor communication skills of participants and the use of globish have become obstacles to communication in international meetings. It's time to examine the implications for interpret

Roderick Jones.
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Abstract. This paper examines interpreting, typically perceived as a communication profession, in the context of modern society and current practice in international meetings, where one may identify increasing obstacles to communication. Three particular obstacles are discussed: new technologies, including ICT and remote interpreting, poor communication skills on the part of meeting participants and the increasing use of international English ("globish"). The main thesis is that the use of interpretation in a significant number of situations where there are objective obstacles to communication, and perhaps even a lack of real interest in communication between meeting participants, implies the need to revisit certain aspects of interpretation theory, to review our pedagogy of interpreting and ultimately for professional interpreters to examine whether they should adapt their interpreting practice.

It is generally assumed that an interpreter works in a context where two or more interlocutors wish to communicate with one another and are prevented from doing so effectively because of a language barrier, if we set aside the case of sign language interpreters who assist those with a hearing disability. Further, it is assumed that there may also be difficulties of understanding between the participants in a discussion because of cultural differences and that the interpreter may fulfil the function not just of a language mediator but also of a cultural mediator.

This assumption underlies the theory of interpreting, including such ideas as the role of the interpreter as a conveyor of meaning, not just words, interpreting seen as a process of analysis of meaning and reformulation in an appropriate form in the target language, and the not always uncontroversial concept of the interpreter’s task being to render the speaker’s intent as much as what the speaker actually says.

The same basic assumption imbues interpreting practice. Speaking with more than thirty years’ experience as a conference interpreter I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of my colleagues, and I, perceive our job as one of facilitators of communication and inter-linguistic and inter-cultural understanding.

And lastly, and quite logically, insofar as the assumption corresponds to orthodox theory and practice, it is naturally one we pass on in interpreter training to our students. Interpreter trainers put much time and effort into inculcating into our students what we see as the basic communication
function of interpreting, and, arising from that function, the basic mechanism of interpreting, namely: listening, understanding, analysing and reformulating.

Theory, practice and pedagogy are therefore all based on the basic assumption that interpreting is a communication exercise. My contention is that this remains to some extent true, but that there are a number of factors which call this into question in day-to-day practice. I should describe interpreting as a communication profession exercised in a context which is less and less conducive to real communication. If this is true, this has implications for our theory of interpreting, and even more urgent ones for our pedagogy and professional practice.

I should like to try to identify three factors which hinder the basic communication function of interpreting, plus one further, specific complicating factor which means that the interpreters cannot concentrate during their work on the fundamental task of ensuring that a speaker X is understood by an audience Y, which does not understand the language spoken by X.

The first factor is alienation due to the use of new technology. It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a society which has greater technical communication possibilities than any before – Internet, e-mail, social networks – but that paradoxically people seem less able than ever to communicate meaningfully with one another. That view of modern society is at best simplistic and may actually be wrong; it is not for me to judge. But for interpreters new technology can have in my view a significant alienating effect.

Clearly, new technology is a relative term. What is new depends on when you are speaking. Simultaneous interpretation is no stranger to the introduction of new technology and the accompanying controversies, and is even in a way a child of new technology. After all, the very fact of introducing headsets, microphones and soundproofed interpreting booths was perceived at the beginning as “new technology”. The introduction of this new-fangled synchronous, or as some said “telephoned”, interpretation was considered by some as an unacceptable debasement of the noble art of high consecutive. Nonetheless, speaking purely empirically, I maintain that interpreters can be very susceptible to alienation related to new technologies.

When we say new technologies nowadays in the context of interpreting we think essentially of two things, IT and remote interpreting. Let me begin with IT. Many colleagues now work with a laptop in the booth. This can of course be a boon. It can help one to call up documents referred to in the meeting. It enables interpreters to search glossaries and terminology databases. But the concentration on text and terminology – whilst of course I should never deny that using correct terminology is an essential part of the interpreter’s job – can lead the interpreter to lose sight of the first aim of interpretation as we learn it, namely conveying meaning and facilitating communication.

Secondly, the sometimes intense relationship between the interpreter and their computer may impinge on the relationship which the interpreter, even if only through their voice, should be striving to achieve and then maintain with their audience. I should like to dwell on this question of voice for a moment. One of the hardest things for an interpreter – what differentiates in my opinion the outstanding interpreter from the merely “good” interpreter – is the ability to interpret correctly while sounding absolutely natural. Natural delivery is not just a question of syntax – respecting the syntax of the target language and not suffering from interference from the source language syntax – but also of rhythm, intonation and use of one’s voice. Our interpretation sounds more authentic and is more convincing if we can identify with the speaker, feel ourselves part of the dialogue between participants. Our concern with technology in the booth can be an obstacle to the empathy necessary to achieve that. Again, without having scientific data to back up this idea, there is much anecdotal evidence from colleagues, including in institutions outside the European Commission, where I work, that the intimacy between interpreter and computer screen can alienate the interpreter from the meeting they are in and impair their interpretation.
Furthermore, the technology is not just in the booth. Almost all delegates in our meetings nowadays work with a laptop too, taking notes, preparing their meeting report. Their attention, too, is focussed on their computer. Often they barely look at their interlocutors, let alone register through facial expression or body language any response to the output of the interpreters. The potential relationship between interpreter and audience can break down, or perhaps is never even established, due to the focus on IT tools on the part of both potential partners. This lack of relationship cannot but induce a feeling of alienation in the interpreter, thus making it harder to perceive and carry out their interpreting as a real communication function.

Then there is remote interpretation. There are various forms of remote interpretation and various configurations, but for the moment I refer to a situation where the participants in a meeting are in one room, can see one another, hear one another directly, even touch one another, and the interpreters are in booths located elsewhere, in another room, perhaps on another floor of the same building, maybe even in another building. I refer to this particular case as it is the form of remote interpretation which has been used in a limited number of high-level meetings in the EU institutions over the last few years. What I have to say about remote interpretation will, however, no doubt apply mutatis mutandis to other remote configurations.

I should say immediately that the technical conditions for remote interpreting in these high-level meetings in the EU are outstandingly good. The sound quality for interpreters is of the highest. The interpreters follow the meeting through a number of monitors where the image quality is High Definition. These monitors and the cameras providing the images are arranged such that an interpreter can focus on the speaker they are interpreting while maintaining a general view of the meeting-room. So it is not the purely technical conditions which create difficulties. However, the interpreters are by definition distanced from the meeting, both physically and psychologically. They follow on monitors and can have the impression that they are not talking to “someone”, but to an inanimate screen. The use of this form of remote interpreting has inevitably led to controversy and lively debate among interpreters in the EU institutions. The debate has concerned things such as the working conditions for remote, how often it is to be used, how long an interpreter may work in remote in one session, and so on. I do not wish to go into that debate, indeed would not consider myself qualified to do so. However, one thing is clear. There are a significant number of interpreters who feel that the technology does alienate them from the proceedings. They seem to feel, moreover, that the longer a session goes on, the greater the feeling of alienation. It is not that one becomes used to the technology; on the contrary, the longer one works with the monitors the more one becomes aware of them. Recently I spoke with a senior colleague who has as much experience with remote as anyone among the European Commission interpreters, and who personally supports its use, and yet he said quite spontaneously that he felt alienated, and that as a meeting continued he felt more and more that he was just talking to a monitor, not to someone.

I wish to stress that I am not making any value-judgement about remote interpreting, still less opposing its use. It is a new technology which exists, which is here to stay, and precisely because it is here to stay (whether it will become more widespread or not we cannot yet judge) we must come to terms with it and draw the appropriate conclusions, in particular conclusions concerning our practice – how can we best work in remote if there is an inevitable alienation factor? – and concerning our pedagogy – how do we prepare young interpreters for this part of the reality of the market?

The second factor I have identified is, in my opinion, even more serious than the drawbacks of new technologies. It relates to the nature of the interaction between participants in many contemporary meetings. The problem is that the participants themselves are simply not interested in communication with one another.
What does a participant in a discussion normally do when communicating? Essentially, although I admit this is an over-simplification, one may pare down such actions, particularly in the meetings conference interpreters work in, to four basic activities: providing information, asking questions to elicit more information, arguing for a given standpoint, and expressing emotions. The last of these four is sometimes present, although it tends to be less so than the other three in political, diplomatic and technical fora. To expand a little on two of these, providing information is not just stating facts, but will include describing a current state of affairs, including subjective realities such as one’s perception of other parties’ opinions, narrating past events, explaining concepts, stating intent, and so on. Under “providing information”, therefore, a whole range of activities is subsumed, including both objective and subjective content. Then arguing for a given standpoint will include agreeing and disagreeing, but also taking issue with the facts as presented by another participant, with the concepts used in the discussion and their interpretation, the logical relationship between facts and concepts, and even the logical form of the argument of other participants, and lastly the conclusions to be drawn from the analysis of all or some of these elements. It is thus, also, a complex and manifold activity, as is “providing information”.

Such elements would seem to form the basis for discussion based on communication. For there to be communication one must then add the preparedness of interlocutors to address one another, to engage their attention on the one hand, and to listen to one another on the other hand.

Here, unfortunately, I have to say that some or all of these elements are absent in many meetings where conference interpreters work. On this point I shall be very down to earth and speak from experience as an interpreter. Firstly, very often speakers have no idea as to how to engage their audience. They have no idea, for example, of how to use visual aids. They use endless, too long and too detailed PowerPoint presentations guaranteed to reduce their audience to somnolence. Sometimes the slides of these presentations are so detailed that the audience cannot make head nor tail of them, sometimes literally cannot read them because type is too small. Speakers often provide information the audience is not interested in, explaining byzantine internal procedures of their organisation which may be incomprehensible to the outsider, and even if they are comprehensible are immaterial. Speakers also fail to understand how to deliver a message at the right speed, at the right moment. This is of course not completely new. I can remember a technical conference in Berlin some years ago where a German-speaking delegate came to see me before delivering his paper, pointing out that his concluding sentence was a quote from Immanuel Kant; it was highly philosophical, he wanted to leave it as matter for reflection for his colleagues and attached great importance to it. It was wonderful that he had the sense to warn the interpreter and try to make the best possible impact on his audience. I wish more delegates would be so forthcoming. But the problem was that he ran out of time for his presentation, as so often at such conferences, raced through to the end and dashed off Kant as if he were merely thanking the audience for their attention. Not even the German speakers, let alone those listening through interpretation, could benefit from the wisdom of Immanuel Kant. Yet I still maintain that the format and practice of international conferences induces participants increasingly to demonstrate poor communication skills.

But the problem is not only on the side of the speaker. Often, to be quite frank, audiences are just not interested in what the speaker is saying. If it is a scientific conference, they have read about the matter in scientific journals, or know they will next month. Moreover, they are probably more concerned about their own paper and delivering it than listening to anyone else’s. If it is a political meeting, they know what is stake, know the others’ positions and are concerned above all with defending their own position. And so on.

Speaking now as a staff interpreter in the EU institutions, I must regret to say that on this score the situation has become worse over the years with institutional changes, inter alia the growth of the
number of Member States. Thirty years ago technical legal meetings, for example, would involve a lively debate with all the intellectual cut and thrust of argument between the sharpest minds on the topic. Now, in an EU of 28, in a number of meetings each delegation is restricted to one statement on any given point on the agenda. They therefore have a formalised, set position, dictated by their instructions from headquarters, which they present, sometimes in a written form which is difficult to interpret and inappropriate to oral communication, and have little or no opportunity to respond to the statements of the other participants. It is therefore not surprising that when one delegate presents their position one sometimes sees other delegations chat among themselves, send text messages on their mobiles, and so on. That is scarcely a basis for communication.

The presentation of positions in written form leads me on to mention one of the two greatest banes of the interpreter’s life currently, namely the fast, read speech. Ask practically any interpreter in Europe – I cannot vouch for the situation elsewhere – what are the greatest problems they face in their work, one of the top two is almost bound to be the fast, read speech which they have not seen beforehand. Unfortunately, we have to deal with it frequently. We do our best, try to filter, use condensation techniques, be coherent and faithful, and so on, but ultimately it is literally making the best of a bad job. It does not redound to the credit of our profession and does little to provide job satisfaction. And why do meeting participants talk like this? Because they don’t care about communication. They have to get on the record what they have said and it literally doesn’t really matter if those present have understood or not.

The picture I am painting sounds exceedingly black. It is one of a world where meetings are just a case of going through the motions, where nobody really listens to anyone else. Things are obviously not that bad. But what I am saying is that such meetings do take place in a proportion which is statistically significant. They put interpreters in a position where, for a non-negligible part of their working life, they are striving to perform a communication function in a context where communication is in any case absent.

In conclusion on this question, we must ask how to react to it. One reaction is to fight against trends, be in contact with our clients and try to persuade them to communicate better. That is indeed something which is being done by interpreters. Freelance interpreters have been very active in trying to promote better practice on the part of participants in meetings using interpretation. One group has even produced an extremely entertaining and instructive video for meeting participants which can be shown at the beginning of a conference. Among the staff interpreters of the EU institutions a number of colleagues have been active for years in what we call “awareness-raising”, that is, being in contact with meeting organisers and participants to persuade them to take into account the fact that the proceedings are interpreted and that therefore respecting certain basic practices will help them get the most out of their meeting.

This certainly helps and I wish to pay tribute to interpreters throughout Europe who have contributed to this work. However, I also believe, unfortunately, that there is an ineluctable trend towards certain forms of international meetings and conferences, inter alia related to institutional constraints, which means that interpreters will have to come to terms with working in conditions where there is little or no real communication between participants. It will therefore be necessary to take this into account in any theory of interpreting and most definitely in interpreter training and in the practice of the profession.

The third factor which runs counter to communication is a rather paradoxical one as it allegedly arises from meeting participants’ desire to communicate better with one another. It is the generalised use of English in international meetings. Participants believe, or claim to believe, that they will communicate better with one another if they speak English to one another and thus by-pass the interpreter. That is obviously going to be true if all interlocutors are genuinely competent in the use of English. However, it assumes first that the audience will listen automatically directly to the
English, and not an interpretation. Let us assume there is a discussion between a French and a German participant. The German speaks English in order, as he says, to be directly understood by the French participant. The latter, however, does not feel fully competent in English and listens to the French interpretation anyway. Which is better: listening to a French interpretation of German spoken by a mother-tongue speaker, or a French interpretation of a German speaking a foreign language they master imperfectly? The chances of improvement of communication are slim.

The question of the competence of the speaker in English is indeed a major problem. The vast majority of speakers who choose to speak English as a foreign language in international meetings overestimate their competence. They may have a good accent, they may have a reasonable grasp of syntax and grammar, often they will have an excellent knowledge of the relevant technical vocabulary. But still they are not able to express themselves clearly and precisely in English. Often there are problems with collocations, such that speakers end up being unclear and sometimes even saying the opposite of what they mean. An example of this – which is true, not made up for the convenience of this article – is that of a very senior politician I heard saying at a high-level meeting, “we must be careful to do this”, when she meant “we should be careful about doing this”, which is of course the exact opposite. The examples in an interpreter’s career are legion.

Still worse, and one of the greatest problems for interpreters nowadays, the speaker sounds superficially as if they are making sense, but if you try to work out what it actually means, it is in fact gobbledygook. Try: “Our objective is that the stakeholders in the consultation all take the platform not only from the representative angle but also are implicated in the overall policy objective.” Listen to that pronounced with a good English accent and, if you listen with an inattentive ear, you may feel it sounds good. The buzzwords are there, stakeholders, overall policy objectives, but if I think about it I should be very hard pressed to know what it means. Colleagues often refer to this form of language with a portmanteau word for “global English”, namely “globish”. For my part, with no disrespect to the producer of wonderful educative children’s toys, I say that such speakers are speaking “Lego English”. They take some basic building blocks – buzzwords, jargon, the appropriate technical terminology – then link them with various connecting phrases to try to build concepts, and produce a result which is as close to real English as a child’s Lego house is to the buildings we live in. My experience is also that this problem gets worse as the day wears on and delegates tire. At the beginning of the meeting they are perhaps able to cope reasonably, but, with fatigue, by four thirty p.m. they have usually run aground.

In a nutshell, interpreters are faced with the challenge of trying to communicate when speakers hinder communication by trying to use a language in which they are incapable of expressing themselves clearly, coherently and correctly.

The three factors I have mentioned are not an exhaustive list, but they are in my opinion key ones which sometimes make the contemporary context of conference interpretation one which is not conducive to communication. As mentioned in my introduction I should also like to mention one specific circumstance which sometimes prevents interpreters from being able to concentrate on their prime function of linguistic and cultural intermediary between a speaker and an audience which needs to understand the speaker. It is a circumstance which concerns primarily interpretation into English, at least in the EU institutions. Speakers of a range of languages – and experience tells me the number is increasing – are concerned above all about having their own comments interpreted “correctly” into English. They assume that the majority audience is listening to English interpretation; the majority of documents are now drafted in English and drafting changes in negotiation are made in English; for them English is the key language. This means that they, or other colleagues in their delegation, listen back to the English interpretation. If they are not happy with the interpretation they complain. If this criticism were based on misinterpretation of meaning or incorrect use of terminology by the interpreter it would be reasonable. But often it is due to the fact
that the speaker believes that their comments can be interpreted in only one way, they are waiting for certain words or phrases, and if the interpreter does not say them they are unhappy. Sometimes such delegates expect the interpretation to come out in a sequence of lexical equivalents between source and target language with minimum or no time-lag, and if they do not hear those equivalents they assume the interpreter has made a mistake or is missing things out. They do not appreciate that the interpreter reformulates in order to express their meaning better.

What does this mean for the interpreters, even if they are aware that the meeting participants’ criticisms are often unfounded and unfair? It means that the interpreter takes into account multiple audiences and multiple interpreting objectives in the course of one single interpretation. We are no longer in the classic scenario on which most interpreting theory and pedagogy is based: X speaks a given language, an audience of one or more people speaking Y need to understand and the interpreter is the language and cultural intermediary. Let me give a practical and very realistic example. I interpret into English inter alia from Czech. Czech is not a very widely known language and when it is spoken in a meeting many colleagues may have to take me on relay. Further, the Czech delegation is listening to my every word and checking my output, sadly often in the spirit described just above. Lastly, because this is a meeting where there is not interpretation into all of the working languages of the EU, a number of non English mother-tongue delegations – say the Finns, Swedes, Danes and representatives of the Baltic countries – are also listening to me. My task is therefore fourfold. I have to provide an adequate interpretation for the British and Irish delegations. I have to adopt a particular style and be extremely clear so as to facilitate as much as possible the work of my colleagues on relay. I have to be very careful to avoid upsetting the Czech delegation which is monitoring my output and adjust my style accordingly. And I have to bear in mind that I am working also for a wide range of non mother-tongue speakers who might not have a deep knowledge of English, and I therefore have to avoid using vocabulary and idiomatic phrases they might not know, even if I should choose to use them in what would normally appear to be the best interpretation to me.

Any theoretical model of interpretation and any pedagogy of interpretation must be able to take into account such interpretation situations which go far beyond the classical models we are used to.

In conclusion I should temper my comments by saying that things are not so catastrophic that interpreters can no longer perform their basic communication function. But as we have been invited to address the reality of the translation and interpreting professions now, I feel it necessary to say that the reality of interpreting today means that we need to pay more attention to the problems of interpreting in a context which militates against communication. The three factors I have highlighted – the intrusion of new technologies, the possible lack of interest of our clients in real communication, and the encroachment of globish – require us to refine our theoretical models. They require interpreters to be aware of them and adapt. And they need to be taken into account in our pedagogy.

It is with our pedagogy that I should like to conclude. There is neither time nor space here to indicate how the problems I have referred to can be taken into account in our pedagogy. But I believe it means above all strengthening one aspect of interpreter training. It is generally assumed that a trained and qualified interpreter should be linguistically competent, of course, and should have acquired the techniques to enable them to perform satisfactorily as a conference interpreter. But I believe passionately that our training should do something more than that. It should help our students and future colleagues not just to acquire the techniques they require at the beginning of their career, but it should also help them to acquire the autonomy to develop their own interpreting strategies, such that they can develop over the whole course of their career. We, as interpreter trainers, should be doing this in any case. But if my understanding of the current state of the profession is correct, and interpreters need to come to terms with the more complex demands made
of them as they attempt to fulfil their prime communication function, then we need even more to help the new generation of interpreters to develop the autonomy which will allow them to be successful.

Roderick JONES was born in 1959 in Warwickshire, England, where he attended school, and later studied French and German at Oxford University. Following his degree he trained as an interpreter at the European Commission and since 1982 he has been a staff interpreter with the Commission. Since 2005 he has been Head of Unit for Czech Interpretation. Besides English his working languages as an interpreter are French, German, Italian, Czech and Slovak. He is particularly interested in interpreter training, a field where he has been very active, and has published notably Conference interpreting explained.

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