Interpreting in diplomatic settings

An overview of the challenges faced when accompanying high-level officials and the know-how an interpreter needs to do the job properly.

Maria Rosaria BURI.
Published: October 29, 2015 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Interpreting in diplomatic settings involves not only language but a broad range of elements and factors that make communication possible. Diplomatic settings include national institutions (Ministries, Presidential Offices, Houses of Parliament), international institutions (the United Nations and its family of agencies, the European Union, WTO, NATO, etc.), and a number of international or inter-regional military organizations.

This study stems from personal experience in the diplomatic settings mentioned above working as an English/Spanish/Italian free-lance interpreter.

Ways and means

It is often said that interpreters working in such settings participate in the making of history. This privilege is not, however, devoid of hardship. On the contrary, dealing with protocol and rules of etiquette puts a heavy burden on the shoulders of a practitioner who, more often than not, has not received specific training in the lexicon, discourse and contexts of this special field.

As in most areas of interpreting, job-specific training and professionalization remain a sore spot. Interpretation schools across the world today tend to differentiate between liaison and conference interpreting. To work in diplomatic settings, however, an interpreter needs solid preparation in both and must master consecutive as well as simultaneous (although chuchotage, i.e. whispered interpretation, remains the most widely used mode in diplomatic interpreting).

Interpreters and translators in this field need to have broad knowledge and keep up to date with world political, social and economic affairs. Keeping abreast of international developments and being conversant with the issues at stake is essential for interpreters and translators working in any language mediation setting.

Extensive knowledge of two or more working languages, the ability to express ideas clearly, and above all great familiarity with the different cultures is a must for the entire community of interpreters. In diplomatic settings, however, good voice projection and especially modulation are assets which seem to acquire even more weight, not just because often microphones are not used, but especially because whispered interpretation is commonly required.

Diplomatic interpreting – and, of course, translating– has its specific rules and principles. Due to a need for confidentiality, the diplomatic milieu is very closed and not much information is available beforehand. Freelancers will need a clearance when working in lieu of in-house staff interpreters, which are not often employed by diplomatic missions, embassies or consulates.
To be a true vehicle of multilingual communication, **interpreters must carry out several complex tasks at the same time**. They have to listen to the speaker and observe the non-verbal signs of his message, as well as the reactions s/he may trigger among and between the recipients of that message; analyze the explicit and implicit message comprehensively, and reproduce that message in another language, taking due account of the formal and substantive characteristics of a different culture. Most of these tasks rely on establishing constant, although discreet, eye-contact with the interlocutors and the audience, if any, in order to be an effective link in communication.

In diplomatic settings, the typical triad of communication/interpretation becomes apparent. The interpreter is actually **the critical link** for communication, crossing cultural barriers and overcoming lexical hurdles.

Interpreters are required to be neutral, unbiased, and even *invisible*. With regard to the latter, much has been written in the field of Translation Studies on the metaphorical invisibility of translators, yet what is required of interpreters is almost a physical invisibility, especially in most diplomatic settings.

Dress codes, etiquette, demeanor, the correct forms of address with dignitaries, and general good social graces are subjects interpreting schools seldom include in their curricula. The same holds true for tact and *savoir-faire*, the principles of being discreet and of not censoring. Today, however, partly due to the conspicuous migration flows across continents, courses in **cross-cultural communication** are offered by many educational institutions and are often included in interpreter training programs. Furthermore, ethics has become a crucial topic in the professionalization of interpreters, together with the issue of not advocating in the language mediation act.

Although translation and interpretation may appear to differ only slightly and share everything but the medium that conveys the message into the other language, these two professions differ as much as written language differs from spoken language. Lack of contextualization can make work more difficult and much more risky for interpreters, yet no hesitation is admitted. When speeches are delivered off-the-cuff, the impact on the interpreter differs from when they have been prepared and are being read. The pace at which a speaker reads is much faster because s/he does not have to pause and think about what s/he is going to say. The sentence structure of a written speech is also more formal. Decisiveness and experience can help practitioners cope with time constraints involved. However, translators who find themselves delving into multidisciplinary technicalities, or solemn and formal registers in written speech texts, seem to benefit from a slightly broader margin.

Thoroughness is a crucial concern for both translators and interpreters. It is never a matter of finding an equivalent, or substituting a word in one language for a word in another language; the interpreter must understand the thought expressed and what underlies the utterances. One cannot translate or interpret something without fully understanding what has been said and –upstream– without mastering the issues at stake.

Consequently, it is important that an institution hiring interpreters makes sure that there is time for a comprehensive briefing on and **preparation of the subjects and issues** at hand.

It is important to note that **diplomatic jargon is a specialized discourse**. The terminology used in such contexts ranges, in fact, from economic, financial, political, military, and cultural subjects to a host of highly technical fields. The more familiar the interpreter is with the type of discourse or text, the better s/he will be able to process it.

**Stress and other challenges**

Both interpreters and translators are under continuous scrutiny in diplomatic settings. “Notetakers” or other members of the delegation at meetings, round tables, bilateral talks and negotiations are
always ready to provide another solution claiming it is more pertinent. Moreover, interpreters and translators may be easily transformed into scapegoats especially when there are misunderstandings or friction between parties – straightforwardly attributed to misinterpretation.

**Stressor agents** play a major role in such settings. The mere fact that failures in communication must be avoided increases tension and the flow of adrenaline. Time and experience, however, tend to mitigate this. Stressors also include sound interferences, such as the so-called “**cocktail party effect**.” This is a phenomenon that tells us how attention can affect the way perceptual stimuli are processed. During a conversation at a dinner, a party, or in any noisy environment where many people are talking at the same time, we somehow manage to tune into the voice of the person that we are interpreting. All the other voices seem to be filtered out, enabling us to concentrate on what one person is saying.

**Fatigue** is still another source of stress. Lengthy sessions may have a negative impact as interpreters in such settings usually work alone, or in the best circumstances with a colleague escorting the counterpart, and the work day goes often goes far beyond regular working hours.

Dealing with **understatement, unspoken assumptions or subtle emphases, innuendo and hedging**, or things left unsaid further increases stress on practitioners, who will often resort to prediction and anticipation techniques. Understatements represent a typical characteristic of diplomatic jargon. Interpreters must, therefore, pay close attention to pragmatic strategies and any cultural aspects involved, and be ready to convey the message across linguistic and cultural barriers.

Communication, in fact, does not consist only in conveying information; here it means achieving mutual understanding. The bilingual– and thus bicultural– interpreter will adequately capture cultural nuances and help bridge cultural gaps.

Other challenges are presented by languages spoken in more than one country. Take German, for example, in which words may have different meanings in Germany, Austria or Switzerland. This is especially true for two of the most widely-spoken languages in the world, English and Spanish. When working with these interpreters have to take into account even variations in pronunciation to bridge lexical and, at times, conceptual gaps.

There is much more to diplomatic interpreting than just traveling with dignitaries and going to receptions. It is a job that rewards practitioners with a wealth of knowledge and invaluable opportunities, varied and gratifying experiences, and the opportunity to participate in the making of history. In return it demands a heightened sense of responsibility and the readiness to meet very difficult challenges.

**Many are the metaphors – old and new– used to describe translation, translators and interpreters.** The bridge, the triad, the traitor/faithful, the juggler, and the tightrope walker are among the most popular and evocative. And today many film makers and writers are attracted by their possibilities. Movies and documentaries on interpreters, communication gaps and cultural barriers are on the rise, some starring famous actors and actresses, and many providing a quite faithful picture of reality.

*They appear in the shadow of the mighty ... The interpreters. They have been around forever or, at least, ever since different languages and cultures have met.*

*The discretion that goes with their job makes interpreters very inconspicuous people. But behind the cloak of professional neutrality, one can discover a cast of fascinating characters who dedicate themselves to their craft with the utmost passion.[11]*

**Today’s practitioners** often look to research for ways to improve the status of interpreters and
translators in the multiplicity of settings in which we are called upon to perform. The specific topic of this paper, diplomatic interpreting, doesn’t receive the recognition it deserves. Yet there are exceptions, such as the appreciation expressed in every closing address made by NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner who, when thanking interpreters, captures the essence of what we do by describing it as “a gift, a skill, an art and a craft”.

This article is based on a presentation delivered at the University of Graz (Austria) during the international conference on Translating and Interpreting as a Social Practice.


Recommended citation format: