

Interpretation

PROFESSIONAL INTERPRETING IN THE REAL WORLD

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Interpretation

Techniques and Exercises

Second Edition

James Nolan

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Preface to the Second Edition	xi
Introduction: Frequently Asked Questions	1
Why This Book?	1
How to Use This Book	1
What Is Interpretation?	2
How Does Interpretation Differ From Translation?	2
What Is the Difference Between Consecutive Interpretation and Simultaneous Interpretation?	3
Is it Useful to Specialize in a Particular Subject Area?	4
Are Some Languages More Important Than Others for Translation and Interpretation?	5
Are There Any Formal Professional Requirements?	6
Is it Advantageous to Be Bilingual?	6
Is Simultaneous Interpretation a Stressful Occupation?	7
1 Speaking	8
Exercises	9
2 Preparation/Anticipating the Speaker	17
Exercises	18
3 Complex Syntax/Compression	24
Exercises	24
4 Word Order/Clusters	44
Exercises	45
5 General Adverbial Clauses	51
Exercises	52

vi	Interpretation	
6	Untranslatability	55
	Exercises	58
7	Figures of Speech	64
	Exercises	65
8	Argumentation	111
	Exercises	111
9	Diction/Register	121
	Exercises	122
10	Formal Style	162
	Exercises	163
11	A Policy Address	180
	Exercises	181
12	Quotations/Allusions/Transposition	205
	Exercises	207
13	Political Discourse	211
	Exercises	211
14	Economic Discourse	225
	Exercises	225
15	Humor	245
	Exercises	248
16	Latinisms	262
	Exercises	263
17	Numbers	272
	Exercises	272
18	Note-taking	278
	Exercises	282
	Annex I: Additional Reformulation Strategies	288
	Using Appositives to Combine, Shorten and Clarify Sentences	288
	Using the Gerund to Create a Concise Subject Phrase	289

Avoiding Nominalizations	290
Avoiding Strings of Prepositional Phrases	291
Keeping Modifiers Close to the Words They Modify	292
 Annex II: Memory Drill	 294
 Annex III: Patterns in Speech	 296
Cause and Effect	296
General to Specific (deductive)	297
Specific to General (inductive)	297
Simple Listing	297
Chronological	298
Classification	298
Comparison/Contrast	299
Thesis – example	299
Problem – solution	299
 Annex IV: Political Discourse – Additional Exercise	 301
Europe Divided Over Palestinian State, by Julio Godoy	301
 Bibliography	 304
Works Consulted	304
Illustrative Materials Used	304
Resources	307
Internet Resources	316
 Index	 325

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Preface to the Second Edition

Interpretation can be defined in a nutshell as conveying understanding. Its value stems from the fact that a speaker’s meaning is best expressed in his or her native tongue but is best understood in the languages of the listeners.

In the art of interpretation several complex interrelated processes make it possible to convey the semantic and emotive contents of a message from one language and culture to another. The complex interaction of these processes and the difficulty of coordinating them simultaneously in the oral/aural mode require alertness, sensitivity, intense concentration and mental agility. In some ways, training for interpreting resembles training for musicianship: the most fruitful approach is guided practice; individual aptitudes and skills are important; talent needs to be nurtured and encouraged; performance is improved by awareness of audience expectations; intuition plays a role; and there may be several valid ways of interpreting a particular passage. The skills required for interpretation, especially simultaneous interpretation,

Table 1 The interpreting process

Listening	
Comprehension/receptivity/empathy	Memorizing
Processing	
Analysis/visualization	Thinking
Reformulation/mimicry	
Inference/extrapolation/deduction	
Speaking/expression	
Reproduction of meaning	Remembering
Articulation, enunciation	
Meaning modulated by tone, intonation	
Emotion conveyed by tone, intonation	

must be developed through practice to the point where they become automatic.

The world has come to rely on interpretation for cross-cultural communication in real time. Although interpretation is not always perfect, if it is performed by professionals with training and a high degree of proficiency in their working languages the result is always better than the alternative method of cross-cultural communication, which consists of asking speakers of various languages to speak a single so-called 'international' language in which they may have limited proficiency.

A second advantage of interpretation is that the respect shown by addressing an interlocutor in that person's own language is conducive to successful diplomacy or negotiation. Learning a foreign language represents a major investment of time and effort, and not all statesmen, diplomats or executives have the time, energy or linguistic talent to master the language of each party with whom they must speak. The interpreter helps these speakers to discharge their duty to make themselves understood and helps listeners to satisfy their need to understand what is being said.

A third advantage of interpretation is that it supports specialization and thus enhances the quality of multinational meetings and deliberations. Where interpretation is available, it is not necessary to take knowledge of a particular language into consideration when deciding who will attend the meeting; consequently, it is easier to select delegates or spokesmen solely on the basis of their qualifications and abilities.

A further advantage of interpretation is that it serves as a psychological equalizer between participants in discussions that are adversarial or controversial. A delegate at an international assembly who is speaking his own language just as he would at home does not feel he is making undue concessions or giving in to pressures from others. Sovereign equality in the use of languages puts all speakers on equal footing.

Finally, interpretation serves as a buffer between different sides in an adversarial discussion, making it possible to use the interpreter as a messenger to convey ideas and positions: it is sometimes possible to say things through a 'linguistic intermediary' that one would hesitate to say directly in one's own language or the language of an adversary.

Because of these advantages, conducting multilateral diplomatic and economic relations in the multilingual mode has become the standard way to do business. But there has been a parallel development: the rate at which speeches are delivered at international meetings has increased dramatically, for several reasons. There are now 196 independent countries in the world and, among the 6000+ languages spoken today, the number of languages being used as a medium of international communication is growing in

parallel with the recognition of people's right to use their native languages. The European Union, for example, now uses 24 languages. Electronic and digital technologies have created an expectation that communication should normally be instantaneous, taking place in real time regardless of geographical and cultural distances. Consequently, there are a growing number of interlocutors on the world scene speaking a growing number of different languages and making their statements in the expectation of being immediately understood. And they all have a great deal to say about a growing number of pressing issues. But for practical and logistical reasons there are still only a limited number of hours in the day that can be used as conference time and those hours must be equitably shared among the many speakers vying for the microphone. The result is that spokesmen inevitably resort to speaking faster and faster during their all-too-brief turn on the world stage, further complicating the interpreter's already difficult task.

Introduction: Frequently Asked Questions

Why This Book?

Over recent decades the explosive growth of globalization and regional integration has fueled parallel growth in multilingual conferences. Although conference interpreting has come of age as a profession, interpreter training programs have had varied success, pointing to the need for an instructional manual which covers the subject comprehensively. This book seeks to fill that need by providing a structured syllabus and an overview of interpretation accompanied by exercises, developed for the classroom, in the main aspects of the art. It is meant to serve as a practical guide for interpreters and as a complement to interpreter training programs, particularly those for students preparing for conference interpreting in international governmental and business settings.

It is assumed that students have mastered their active and passive working languages and the fundamentals of translation. Those exercises which deal with lexicon focus on expanding the student's range of expression in order to build vocabulary to the level needed for conference interpreting.

The texts used in the exercises have been selected both to illustrate various aspects of translation and interpretation and to introduce the student to the wide range of topics and perspectives that arise in the international fora where conference interpreters work.

How to Use This Book

Interpretation cannot be learned from a book alone, but only through a combination of study and steady practice. However, it is hoped that the

exercises in this book will help the student interpreter determine what techniques she or he needs to concentrate on. Although interpretation is an oral skill, it contains an element of composition. Consequently, the writing exercises in this book should not be overlooked.

For the sake of brevity, the treatment of subjects and techniques in this book is somewhat arbitrarily divided and some subjects are treated together in one chapter. The chapters need not be followed strictly in sequence and can be taken up in any order that the instructor or student finds appropriate, although it is strongly recommended that none be omitted from a comprehensive introductory course. The skills introduced earlier in the book (e.g. developing confidence as a public speaker) are those which are most necessary to a professional interpreter or which usually take longer for most students to master; those presented later in the book (e.g. transposing literary allusions) are techniques which are less often needed in practice or which interpreters can gradually acquire outside the classroom through experience and study. Most of the exercises can be done in class and/or as homework. Some require the use of tape recorders. Although the working languages used in these exercises are English, French and Spanish, most of the exercises can be adapted for other languages. Exercises for other languages may also be accessed through the internet resources and links listed in the final section of the Bibliography.

What Is Interpretation?

Interpretation can be defined in a nutshell as conveying understanding. Its usefulness stems from the fact that a speaker's meaning is best expressed in his or her native tongue but is best understood in the languages of the listeners.

In addition, the respect shown by addressing an interlocutor in that person's own language is conducive to successful diplomacy or negotiation. For example, US President John F. Kennedy undertook the task of mastering French specifically with a view toward negotiating with French President Charles de Gaulle. But not all statesmen and diplomats have the time, energy or linguistic talent for mastering the language of each party with whom they must speak. By bridging the gap between languages, the interpreter helps speakers discharge their duty to make themselves understood and helps listeners to satisfy their need to understand what is being said.

How Does Interpretation Differ From Translation?

A translator studies written material in one language (the 'source language') and reproduces it in written form in another language (the 'target

language’). An interpreter listens to a spoken message in the source language and renders it orally, consecutively or simultaneously, in the target language. Both the translator and the interpreter must have a thorough mastery of the target language, as well as a very good passive understanding of the source language or languages with which they work. For most interpreters, the target language will be his or her native tongue.

The translator relies mainly on thorough research with background materials and dictionaries in order to produce the most accurate and readable written translation possible. The interpreter relies mainly on the ability to get the gist of the message across to the target audience on the spot.

No translation is ever ‘perfect’ because cultures and languages differ. However, in practice, the translator is usually held to a higher standard of accuracy and completeness (including the ability to reproduce the style of the original), while the interpreter is expected to convey the essence of the message immediately.

The translator’s activity is more like that of a writer, while the interpreter’s performance is more like that of an actor. A good translator will spend much time searching for the correct technical term or the right choice of words, but a good interpreter must immediately come up with a satisfactory paraphrase or a rough equivalent if *le mot juste* does not come to mind, in order not to keep the audience waiting. Some people are able to do both translation and interpretation. Others find that, for reasons of temperament and personality, they cannot do one or the other. Generally, some experience as a translator provides a good foundation for becoming an interpreter.

What Is the Difference Between Consecutive Interpretation and Simultaneous Interpretation?

A consecutive interpreter listens to the speaker, takes notes, and then reproduces the speech in the target language. Depending on the length of the speech, this may be done all at one go or in several segments. The consecutive interpreter relies mainly on memory, but good note-taking technique is an essential aid.

A simultaneous interpreter, usually sitting in a soundproof booth, listens to the speaker through earphones and, speaking into a microphone, reproduces the speech in the target language as it is being delivered in the source language. Because the simultaneous interpreter cannot fall too far behind, this method requires considerable practice and presence of mind.

Consecutive interpretation was long the standard method, until simultaneous interpretation was first tried out on a large scale, and found to be

workable, at the Nuremberg trials. Thanks to that breakthrough and to modern sound equipment, simultaneous interpretation has now become the most widely used method, in every type of meeting from business conventions to summit conferences, and can even be done via remote communications links. It is much less time consuming and enables a multilingual conference, with participants speaking a number of languages, to proceed without interruption. However, consecutive interpretation is still preferred in certain situations, such as one-on-one interviews, confidential hearings, brief public appearances by prominent persons or some legal proceedings. It has the advantage of not requiring much equipment.

Occasionally, interpreters may be asked to do ‘whispering’ or ‘chuchotage’, which consists of sitting behind a participant at a meeting and simultaneously interpreting the proceedings *sotto voce* only for that person.

Simultaneous interpreters normally work in teams of two per booth, taking turns in shifts of about 30 minutes each for a maximum of about three hours at a time, which has been found to be the maximum average time during which the necessary concentration and accuracy can be sustained. They generally work only into their ‘A’ (best) language, or their mother tongue. In certain situations (e.g. in a meeting where one language largely predominates), a single team of three people, known as a ‘petite équipe’, will work both ways, rather than two booths of two people each. The number of languages spoken at the meeting may also determine the make-up of the team. In the United Nations, for example, the standard ‘English booth’ team consists of two interpreters, one of whom interprets from Russian, one of whom interprets from Spanish, and both of whom can interpret from French. For certain language combinations, relay, or two-step, interpretation is also sometimes used: a speaker will be interpreted in one booth from language A into language B, and then in another booth from language B into language C.

Is it Useful to Specialize in a Particular Subject Area?

Yes. It is easier to translate or interpret with an understanding of the subject. Some translators, for example, specialize in medical translation and obtain regular work from pharmaceutical manufacturers. Some translation agencies specialize in technical, business or legal translation and rely on translators and interpreters with expertise in those areas. Specialist translators can usually command higher fees.