

The better the preparation the better the interpretation at technical conferences¹

J.-B. QUICHERON,

President of the Chambre belge des Traducteurs, Interprètes et Philologues

Published in "Van taal tot taal". Maart 1983 – Jaargang 27 Nr. 1 Nederlands Genootschap van Vertalers. Haarlem pp. 3-8

Today's subject is neither new nor revolutionary. Yet, it is not often debated in front of large audiences, as if interpreters were too shy to disclose their difficulties or did not think it intellectually worth mentioning.

Before large audiences, one usually praises the merits of the "great interpreter" working for Heads of State, i.e. "the thoroughbred interpreter": one is less talkative about the "cart-horse interpreter" puffing and blowing in the harness of technical meetings.

Today, we shall leave the paddock and the race-courses where the thoroughbreds excel and shall devote our attention to more bucolic joys. We shall watch the cart-horses and will find out that they can seriously compete with the proud racehorses I was just referring to as to speed performances.

I. Introduction

Before embarking on the description of our activities, it would be advisable to give a few definitions and set the framework in which interpreters work in Brussels in the European institutions..

1. Definitions

What is a scientific and technical congress? And what are the objectives of good preparation?

- a. Good preparation should enable interpreters to give their best performance
- b. A technical symposium is a meeting
 - i. which lasts at least two days
 - ii. which brings together 100 to 700 participants
 - iii. during which many speeches or papers are read aloud (almost no free speech)
 - iv. the subject of which belongs to the top priority of R & D in today's science

The method stated below is not new and is already adopted, at least in a partial way, by single interpreters. When embedded in a large organisation like the Commission of the European Communities, it allows a systematic and thorough preparation of interpreters.

2. Administrative framework (SCIC²)

a) SCIC

¹ Lecture delivered 'à titre personnel' at the NGV meeting held in Utrecht in October 30, 1982 as Chairman of the Belgian Association of translators and interpreters (CBTIP-BKVTF).

² Service Commun Interprétation-Conférences. It encompasses the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, the Economic and Social Committee and the European Bank of Investment

It is the biggest interpretation service in the world (Jan. '81: 303 staff interpreters and circa 80 free-lancers hired a day, number of meetings with interpretation in 1979) - only with the Commission- = 4.590).

b) Number of important technical meetings

4.590 meetings with interpretation (Commission only)

1979 764 with documents sent beforehand

64 with one or a half day off for preparation purposes

1980 among meetings with documents distributed beforehand

89 related to nuclear energy

85 related to steel

30 related to data processing

25 related to coal

II. General considerations on the linguistic and technical attainments of an interpreter

A conference interpreter is not supposed to know everything. His technical attainments and capacities are limited by definition (his general knowledge for example of solar energy is far below what is necessary to interpret at a congress on solar energy) :

- his technical knowledge is limited horizontally (number of technical fields in which he is knowledgeable)
- his technical attainments are limited vertically also (level of command of specific field of science)
- it is impossible to know, even superficially, the state of the art in each field of modern science
- he rarely knows very well a given field of science or technique (unless he is for example a doctor or an engineer: even in the latter case, he is a specialist only in a single field).

An interpreter working, interpreting at a congress on photovoltaic solar energy ought to know the general principles of semi-conductors and also the technique of the drawing of silicon ingots.

III. Preparing the interpreters for technical conferences inside the CEC

Preliminary remarks

Technical interpretation requires an absolute command of interpretation (be it consecutive or simultaneous). One should avoid using beginners. A practice of at least two years is a prerequisite for being able to interpret at complex technical congresses.

Why is it so?

- It is absolutely essential to have a perfect command of the target language (be able to juggle with syntax), this is only feasible with practice
- It is indispensable to be able to reach a maximum level of mind concentration (a beginner has difficulties of rendering the whole message)
- The interpreter should be able to give a word-by-word translation in special cases.

1) How to prepare interpreters for a technical subject away from the pressure of a given congress

- Certain interpreters have been trained on the spot (with advantages and drawbacks)
- Others have been trained by attending special courses, examples: data-processing, two days at the IBM centre in La Hulpe, Belgium, 1975; nuclear energy, five days at Ispra, Italy, 1979; steel, three days at St Germain-en-Laye, France, 1979; coal, three days in Doncaster and London, 1979.

- In January 1980, there were 64 nuclear specialists, 47 data-processing specialists, 38 steel specialists and 14 coals specialists.

In this way the interpreter knows the basic phenomena of a specific field of science. This shall not prevent him from having to prepare himself specifically for a given congress.

2. *Preparing for a big technical congress (ex: biomass, solar energy, microdosimetry)*

- *Applying for the papers or call for papers*
A few months before the conference, we send a special form giving information on all the details relating to a good organisation of the congress. We also try to exercise an influence on the setting up of programmes.
- *Which documents should we have?* Not all have the same value for interpreters, example of former proceedings. We ask the documents which are most useful for the interpreter (i.e. in decreasing order of importance):
 - o *oral communications* (even written text as read by the speaker during congress)
 - o failing these, *the written statements* (as to be published in the proceedings or so partially read during the conference)
 - o for want of both preceding types of documents, *former proceedings* on the same subject
 - o if nothing else is available, *book of abstracts*
- *Terminological preparation*
We have a stock of about ninety terminological lists on all sorts of subjects. For highly technical congresses, a special effort is being made in cooperation with the terminological offices of the CEC. A terminologist from the terminological office (usually from the Commission in Brussels) processes the documents we received and gives us an ad hoc list of all the technical words needed for a given congress, usually based on English. The terminologist may attend the briefing and the congress; this allows him to check with the specialists the accuracy of his terminology.

This type of cooperation has favourable repercussions on the terminologist's work, since he is compelled to study subject matters where he would have done no research, had he not been prompted to do so by his colleague interpreter.

- *Getting acquainted with the subject (specialized documentation)*
We try and awaken among our colleagues understanding of the subject matter. Too often interpreters will merely translate words. The more we know about a given subject, the more one will faithfully reproduce the message.
Many scientists believe and say that the interpreter will never be able to reproduce perfectly the message, since he is not knowledgeable of the subject as the specialist. This assertion is wrong. An interpreter need not know as much as a specialist to do a good job: yet he should have a deep insight into the field in question to give a correct interpretation.

Our specialized documentation consists of:

- booklets explaining the basic phenomena of a given field of science (e.g. What is a computer?)
 - articles from technical magazines (*Scientific American* for example)
 - background information coming from different research centres
- The reference list of bibliography is stored in our computer.

- *Briefing*
Before a technical congress, scientists and interpreters may meet together. The briefing aims at giving the interpreters a deeper insight into professional jargon and of the basic phenomena or the special problems in a given field of research. The terminologist may attend the briefing.
 - o *duration*: one or half a day,
 - o *date*: just before the meeting.
 - o *Venue*: Brussels or outside
 - o *competence at technical level*: the scientists (taken all together) ought to know all the fields dealt with during the congress
 - o *competence at linguistic level*: the scientists (taken all together) ought to cover all languages of the conference

- *Assessment of the glossary after the congress*
The interpreter receives after the meeting a form in which he is asked to assess the quality of the glossary established by the terminology office. Remarks are then sent to the terminology office for possible completion of the glossary (e.g. European Investment Bank, French-English Glossary with abbreviations and explanation notes).

Future possibilities

Terminological data bank (Eurodicautom)

This bank can deliver terminology information in two forms:

- o via screen display
- o through batch processing

The internal structure of the computer does not allow output of terminological lists according to a given subject matter. Tests made up to now have not been conclusive for the preparation of interpreters for highly technical conferences.

IV. Some considerations about the reality of multilingual interpretation of technical congresses

Although we do our utmost to prepare the interpreters for technical conferences, we still stumble over difficulties originating from bad habits of scientists or from bad organization (reading texts and reading them very quickly, heavy agendas or programmes).

Paradoxically, scientists need a non-scientist in order to understand each other.

1. What sometimes impedes communication during the congress?

In order to be brief, let us take the most common cases:

a. the speaker lectures without reading

- *This is easier* for the interpreter, for thought is being generated while speaking; advantage: thought less complex, sometimes redundant; drawback: thought might be less clear, because ideas have not been thought out.
- *Yet, interpreting may remain difficult*, if speaker knows subject perfectly, if speaker quoted figures and rushes down complex formulae, if speaker explains very complex phenomena he knows very well.
- Interpreting remains feasible in all cases.

-

b. *The speaker reads out his written text*

- *If he reads well* and we have the text, everything is all right. If he reads well and we do not have the text, we run the risk of omitting certain elements, because written thought is more elaborate (sometimes in simultaneous interpreting the meaning of a sentence is only understandable at the end), time lag due to interpreting may play tricks on short term memory.
- *If he reads badly and quickly*, the message may become incoherent. According to circumstances, consequences may differ:
- *If the speaker syntax is poor* (applies to foreigners speaking a foreign language), the interpreter does not necessarily understand the causal link between the described phenomena: he will reproduce the message as heard, which means the message may or may not be understood; it depends on the ability of the listening delegate to reshape the message.
- If the speaker reads too fast, the interpreter may cling to certain words he hears and remembers better than others, he translates them but these words are not necessarily essential for the understanding (scraps of thoughts without casual links) or he succeeds in summing up in a coherent way but many details will be lacking or he disconnects (shuts up the mike) because the message he reproduces is too incoherent.

2. *Some limits to communication*

Here are certain elements which may limit communication. Some of them are more typical of conference interpretation than others:

- esoterism, voluntary or not, of the speaker (impossibility for the speaker of expressing complex concepts in relatively clear and simple terms)
- hermetic language specific to a given subject (description of the different states of matter down to the level of particles, high level of mathematics, complex chemistry)
- foreign accents
- poor syntax of speaker
- physiological limits of interpreter's brain
- relative level of intelligence, knowledge and preparation of the interpreter concerned
- unharmonized terminology
- frantic reading.

After this list of limits to communication, one may think that understanding during a conference may be due only to miracle. I sometimes have the same impression while interpreting. *I think that this miracle results from the conjunction of three intelligences, that of the speaker, of the interpreter and of the listener. It is up to you to make your own judgment.*

V. Conclusion

This rapid survey of interpretation at technical congresses allows drawing a few conclusions:

- Our attempts to improve interpreter's preparation within the Commission have given fairly good results. Yet some mishaps are still possible: very often they are due to bad organizing.
- It is extremely difficult during a technical meeting to know who is responsible for the lack of understanding (the interpreter, the speaker or the author), only a tape recording of both versions and asking the scientists why they did not understand would give the answer). No one has time for this !
- Any subject can be interpreted, as long as an adequate preparation is foreseen and done, and lectures are being given under reasonable circumstances.

- Yet, man being what he is, it is still necessary:
 - to reduce the volume of all too often overloaded programmes
 - to make the scientific community understand why communication is so important (necessity to write articles in scientific press, teach properly mother tongue before university)
 - to limit as far as possible the reading of texts, or if impossible, insist on a certain rhythm being respected (e.g. five pages in twenty minutes).

Yet, I do not harbour the illusion that we shall improve matters very rapidly. The interpreter has to struggle with many enemies: subject specificity, complexity of ideas, terminological richness of different technical languages, accents and constraints of all sorts imposed by the speaker.

Each congress is a new challenge for the interpreter, the opportunity to discover a new field of science, a fight against an invisible enemy and also the discovery of the infinity of human knowledge. Continually he must take up this challenge, the outcome of which remains uncertain.

Is it not the secret charm of this profession to be constantly scrutinizing and analyzing one's work in the hope of attaining even higher realms of perfection?