

COMMUNICATIVE AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF INTERPRETER COMPETENCE

Nelly Yakimova

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” (Bulgaria)

Nelly Yakimova. COMMUNICATIVE AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF INTERPRETER COMPETENCE

Abstract. The paper deals with the communicative and pragmatic aspects of interpreting and interpreter competence. Interpreting is seen as a communicative act that involves not only verbal interaction but also non-verbal cues and situational features. It is argued that the recognition and comprehension of those features help interpreters choose the best interpreting strategies in order to fulfill the communicative intention of the speaker. In consecutive interpreting, that choice is made on the macro level, i.e. the level of the text. It is further demonstrated that Grice’s Cooperative Principle may serve as a framework for analysing interpreting strategies in dialogue interpreting.

Keywords: interpreting, communicative competence, pragmatic competence, communicative intention, conversational maxims.

Нели Якимова. КОМУНИКАТИВНИ И ПРАГМАТИЧНИ АСПЕКТИ НА КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТТА НА УСТНИЯ ПРЕВОДАЧ

Резюме. В статията са разгледани комуникативни и прагматични аспекти на устния превод и компетентността на устния преводач. Устният превод се третира като комуникативен акт, включващ не само вербална комуникация, а и невербални елементи и ситуационни характеристики. Изтъква се идеята, че разпознаването и разбирането на тези характеристики помагат на преводача да избере най-подходящите стратегии, за да предаде комуникативното намерение на оратора. При консекутивния превод този избор се прави на макрониво, т.е. на нивото на текста. Също така е показано, че принципът за сътрудничество на Грайс може да служи като рамка за анализ на преводни стратегии в превода на диалог.

Ключови думи: устен превод, комуникативна компетентност, прагматична компетентност, комуникативно намерение, максими в речевото общуване.

Aim and rationale

The aim of this paper is to discuss some aspects of interpreting that are related to the communicative and pragmatic competence of interpreters. Much research in the field of translation deals with translation competence, but not exclusively with interpreter and interpreting competence. Nevertheless, there are a number of researchers who have looked at various facets of what it takes to be a professional interpreter, some with a view to developing teaching strategies, others intending to present theoretical models. As with translation, it is acknowledged that interpreter and interpreting competence is more than having linguistic competence in two or more languages. Moreover, those models are aimed at capturing the specific knowledge, skills and abilities of a competent interpreter. For example, Albl-Mikasa (2012) offers a conceptualisation of interpreter competence based on the interpreting process and experience. The model is particularly focused on simultaneous interpreting and involves subsets of skills, needed at different stages of the interpreting activity. It covers the whole process starting from a high-level command of languages and streamlined preparation for assignments, all the way through the in-process skills of comprehension and production, finally reaching quality control after the event has finished. The author also discusses “para-process” skills for doing business, dealing with customers, and a general predilection for life-long learning. Kalina (2000), on the other hand, expressly points out that interpreter competence is the ability to perform in a communicative situation. In a comprehensive cognitive-pragmatic analysis of simultaneous interpretation, Setton (1999) argues that adequate discourse representation and communication requires, above all, illocutionary markers and ostensive guidance. Evidently, any attempt at analysing interpreting will take account of the fact that it is a communicative act involving interlingual and intercultural mediation. Therefore, it can be argued that a professional interpreter needs to be a good communicator. Undoubtedly, the essence of professional interpreting stretches beyond linguistic fluency, knowledge of terminology, anticipation and transfer skills: it involves targeted preparation, ability to adjust to different contexts of situation, strategies for coping with uncertainty, stamina, and above all, an ability to communicate. The latter is the focus of the following discussion. In the argument developed below communicative and pragmatic competence are postulated as an integral part of interpreter competence. The conclusions are drawn on the basis of examples from pedagogical and authentic speeches and the strategies for their interpretation. The examples are elicited from observations of interpreting in a training context and real-life events. The concepts of communicative and pragmatic competence are considered essential for accounting for two fundamental features of interpreting: (i) interpreting is a form of communication, and (ii) interpreting involves actual use of language in a particular context of situation, which requires pragmatic knowledge and abilities.

Interpreting as a communicative act

In order to explain the relevance of communicative and pragmatic competence to the overall competence of professional interpreters, we need to start from the premise that an interpreter-mediated event is essentially a communicative event, i.e. an activity governed by rules for communication, and involves the use of language. The difference, compared to monolingual settings, is that communication takes place in two or more languages via one or more mediators, or interpreters. The task of the interpreter is to listen to one of the participants in the event, speaking in one language, and then convey the information to the other participants, in another language. When analysing this process, it is important to consider that the information flow that reaches the interpreter travels through different channels and in different codes. As argued by Saville-Troike (1982) in her proposed framework for analysis of communicative events, a message is transmitted verbally and non-verbally, vocally and non-vocally. This is true not only of monolingual communication, but also of bi- or multilingual events. To achieve comprehension, the interpreter needs to, first of all, hear the verbal message delivered through the vocal channel of communication. In addition, the interpreter can make sense of the message through non-verbal, but still vocal cues such as intonation, pitch of the voice, and other prosodic factors. Thirdly, the interpreter can make inferences about the intended meanings communicated non-verbally and non-vocally through the speaker's body language, positioning, and eye movement. Sign language interpreters, on the other hand, receive and deliver information only through the non-vocal channel. The importance of non-vocal channels of communication in verbal interaction is evident in the fact that interpreters are usually able to see the speaker, and if they are not, as in the case of very large rooms, or remote interpreting, there are TV monitors in the booth to show a close-up of whoever takes the floor. Consequently, one can conclude that speakers do not rely only on one channel and code of communication to convey their message.

However, those channels and codes are not equally available to interpreters when it comes to producing a message in the target language. Certainly, the message needs to be delivered verbally. Interpreters are also expected to mimic intonation to a certain extent, and yet should be careful not to overdo it. If they are working in a booth, their body language will not be relevant to the audience, as they will not be seen, but in situations when interpreters are working in the consecutive mode in front of an audience, the use of facial expressions and gestures should be limited. As argued by Alexieva (2010a), too much gesturing will unduly attract the attention of the audience to the interpreter and skew the objective assessment of his/her performance. In other words, interpreters are the voice of the speaker, but their presence should not be overwhelming. It should be noted, however, that there are some occasions, when speakers ask interpreters to mirror not only the tone of their voice but also their body language because they want to reinforce or "act out" the ideas they wish to put across.

Against this background, interpreters are expected to be familiar with cultural references and meanings conveyed not only verbally but also through body language. A cultural difference that always creates confusion is the use of nodding and shaking one's head to denote agreement and disagreement in Bulgaria and the rest of Europe. In such cases it is awkward for a West European, for example, to see a Bulgarian interlocutor shaking his/her head and hear the interpreter saying "yes" at the same time. In order to avoid misunderstandings as a result of cultural differences, interpreters should be trained to switch between different frames of reference and be able to account for the differences. Hence the importance for an interpreter to be not only linguistically but also intercultural competent.

Intercultural competence, and more specifically intercultural communicative competence, is certainly closely related to communicative and pragmatic competence. As I discuss the communicative and pragmatic aspects of interpreting in general, I will not focus exclusively on intercultural differences that present challenges for interpreters.

Interpreter competence from a communicative and pragmatic perspective

Communicative competence was first introduced by Dell Hymes (1972) in the context of first language acquisition and broadly defined as knowing what to say to whom and how in a given situation. Interpreters rarely have a choice what to say and never to whom. With regard to the latter, interpreters have no control over the participants in a communicative event. Situations when an interpreter may have a choice what to say do exist and will be dealt with later. It seems then that what remains the focus of the interpreter's decision-making process is how to deliver the message both in terms of verbal expression and non-verbal communication when working in the consecutive mode, and only in terms of verbal expression in the simultaneous mode. Contextual variation in language use is traditionally dealt with in the area of pragmatics. According to Thomas (1983: 92), the "ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" is pragmatic competence. With the aim of effectively facilitating communication, interpreters should be able to formulate their utterances in such a way as to reflect the communicative goals of the speaker. This means that interpreters may choose strategies other than a literal rendition of an original utterance.

As Alexieva (2010a) suggests, a decision is not always determined by strict rules governing the use of terminology and syntactic structures. On the macro, that is the textual, level, the interpreter needs to create a paradigm of explicit and implicit predications that can be expressed in different configurations. The goal is to convey the message in the most economical way with the right level of cohesion and coherence. This involves making decisions about what should be explicitated and what can be left implicit. In order to be able to make the right decisions, the interpreter should have a mental picture of the original text retained in his/her short-

term memory. It is important to note that the text in its entirety is accessible to the interpreter only in the consecutive mode. When working in a booth, the interpreter is gradually exposed to segments of the original text, as delivered by the speaker, and has to make sense of the ideas and the links between them throughout the progression of the speech. Nevertheless, even in a state of synchronicity, the interpreter can decide on the level of explicitness/implicitness that will be conveyed to the hearer.

The parameter of the explicit/implicit ratio has a direct bearing on the question of whether interpreters have control over what to say. In order to fulfill their task, interpreters are expected to deliver all the ideas expressed by the speaker and follow the same line of reasoning. Any omission, addition or shift in the course of argument will put at stake the faithfulness of the rendition and consequently take away from the quality of interpretation. Therefore, one can easily conclude that interpreters do not have a choice what to say. However, it can be argued that these constraints are valid only on the macro level, whereas on the micro level, that is the level of the word or phrase, interpreters do have a choice. Spontaneous speech often contains redundancies and repetitions, false starts and reformulations, which are not rendered in the interpretation, unless they are employed by the speaker in order to make a point. Corrections and reformulations should be avoided at any rate for the sake of fluency of expression, while redundancies provide a good opportunity for searching for a succinct way of expression and summarising. This leads to a compression of the original message without compromising the faithful rendition of the original ideas. In some situations, interpreters are forced to trim the details of the original message simply because they are not able to keep up with the original speed of delivery. This is when their skills for analysis, recognition of those ideas that are the building blocks of the original speech, and synthesis are put to the test.

Hence, it can be inferred that understanding and conveying ideas, not words, lies at the heart of interpreter competence. This assumption falls in line with the sense-based approach to interpreting pioneered by Seleskovitch (1975/2000). Shifting the focus away from individual words, one could even go on to suggest that a successful performance will be judged against the interpreter's ability to deliver the speaker's intended meaning. As argued by Jones (2002),

[...] the interpreter has to understand ideas, not words. It may well be perfectly possible to understand a speaker's meaning without actually understanding every single word and expression they use, and without having to reproduce all of those terms in the interpretation (11).

The examples that follow are presented to illustrate the role of pragmatic competence in the context of interpreting.

Pragmatic competence in action

Let us now look at the following excerpts from speeches for simultaneous interpretation alongside with their rendition in Bulgarian, and analyse the strategies employed by the interpreters:

- | | |
|--|---|
| (1) ¹ it must be said that to this day the impact of fishing and other human activities at sea, and here I mean oil rigs, noise pollution caused by big vessels, submarines, what have you , is not fully understood. | → трябва да кажем, че досега въздействието на риболова и други човешки дейности в морето, като нефтени платформи, шумово замърсяване от големи плавателни съдове, [подводници] не е напълно изследвано. |
| (2) ² this led, of course, to the removal of these products from many supermarket shelves, supermarket chains like TESCO and ALDE, for example, had to remove these products . | това, разбира се, доведе до изтеглянето на тези продукти от много супермаркети, като ТЕСКО и АЛДЕ. |
| (3) ³ in 1955, the average chicken weighed 0.9 kilos. by 2005, chickens have become giants, weighing 4.2 kilos | през 1955 г. едно пиле средно е тежало 0,9 кг, през 2005 г. пилетата вече стават гиганти с тегло над 4 кг . |

In the first example, the interpreter has slightly compressed the original utterance making two shifts. The first comes when the speaker uses “here I mean” to introduce several examples. The interpreter could have easily opted for a literal rendition, “тук имам предвид“, and yet, has used an equivalent expression containing a single word, „като“ (such as). This is done in order to save time and focus on the next portion of information. Towards the end of the utterance, the speaker talks about “noise pollution caused by big vessels, submarines, what have you”. The Bulgarian version only mentions „шумово замърсяване от големи плавателни съдове“. Technically, the interpreter has failed to render all the information in the original: „подводници и какво ли още не“. However, this omission does not affect the hearer’s complete understanding of the idea.

In the second example, the final clause repeats what was said at the beginning of the utterance, and therefore the interpreter has left it out.

The strategy used in the third example is different. Numbers are usually challenging to remember and deliver in another language, and a common interpreting strategy is to generalise in order to avoid telling a wrong number. „Над 4 кг“

¹ SR 26035. Protecting the marine environment. <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sr/speech/protecting-marine-environment>

² SR 29903. Food safety. <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sr/speech/food-safety-0>

³ SR 29869. The great chlorinated chicken debate. <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sr/speech/great-chlorinated-chicken-debate>

(over 4 kg) is not exact, but has the same pragmatic force, as it conveys the idea that in 2005 chickens weighed much more than in 1955.

As can be seen, on a micro level, some information is missing in the Bulgarian renditions. At the same time, on the macro level, the task has been fulfilled: the ideas expressed in the original texts are delivered successfully. The quality of the interpretation does not suffer from the compression; on the contrary, avoidance of repetition in the second example leads to a stylistic improvement.

Another example, this time from an exercise with a speech for consecutive interpreting, features a strategy of cultural substitution, or adaptation, identified by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1995) as one of seven translation procedures.

The speaker is explaining what will happen if a driver is caught infringing the law:

⁽⁴⁾ ⁴[...] you will **have some points on** your driving license. → [...] ще ви **отнемат точки** от талона.

Clearly, this example illustrates two different systems for punishing driving offenders. In the UK, one is given penalty points, while in Bulgaria points are taken from one's driving license. The interpreter's strategy was to substitute the original idea for another one relevant to the Bulgarian context. In this way, the interpreter created an easier path of inferencing for the hearer. Had the interpreter chosen to render the idea literally, „ще ви дадат точки/ ще добавят точки към шофьорската ви книжка“, the hearer would have struggled to understand the idea of the penalty. In the context of the Bulgarian system, it may be even confusing, because giving more points creates an impression of giving a reward. A strategy using literal translation and at the same time leading the hearer towards an accurate understanding of the original idea would be to explicitate the purpose of the points given to the driving offender: „ще ви дадат **наказателни** точки“ (you will be given **penalty** points). It is worth recalling that this speech was delivered for interpretation in the consecutive mode. This gave ample time to the interpreter to think of a solution that would be natural and easy to understand by the hearer.

On the basis of these and other similar examples, one could arrive at the conclusion that the task of the interpreter is to identify and convey the speaker's intended meaning in a given context of situation. In order to correctly understand this meaning, the interpreter is primarily led by the verbal message, aided by the speaker's tone of voice, non-verbal communication, and other situational factors such as the type of the event, its topic, and participants. An accurate comprehension of all these features can be achieved with a good level of communicative and pragmatic competence.

⁴ SR 23414. New accident reduction scheme in Dorset II. <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sr/speech/new-accident-reduction-scheme-dorset-ii>

From a pragmatic perspective, understanding the speaker's intention means being able to follow a path of inferencing from the level of expressed meaning and reach the level of implied meaning. The task of the interpreter then is to identify conversational implicatures, intentionally or unintentionally generated by the speaker, and find adequate solutions for their transposition in the target language. The next section offers a discussion of possible scenarios of how implicatures are dealt with in the context of interpreting.

Observing the conversational maxims

There are interpreter-mediated events involving more dynamic interaction, such as dialogue interpreting, which can be analysed from the perspective of Grice's Cooperative Principle: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1975: 45).

One could even argue that the prescriptive nature of the principle is in line with the interpreter's task to ensure effective communication. However, speakers often fail to observe the conversational maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner. In political talks, especially, vague language, restrained or false statements and irony are often used for rhetorical effect or manipulation. At the same time conveying implied meaning can be a challenge.

Flouting a maxim

Interpreters are not expected to flout a maxim, i.e. blatantly fail to observe it with the intention of generating an implicature, unless the speaker does so. For example, if a speaker uses irony and says the opposite of what he/she believes to be true, thus flouting the Maxim of Quality, the interpreter is expected to convey the same propositional content. Ideally, the hearer will then follow a path of inferencing and arrive at a meaning opposite to the one expressed in the interpreter's utterance and understand the irony. However, ironic statements are not always recognised as such, especially in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in order to avoid misunderstanding, the interpreter will sometimes opt for an explicit rendition of the implied meaning and consciously fail to obtain the ironic effect.

Violating a maxim

In case a speaker violates a maxim, i.e. unostentatiously disregards it in order to mislead, the interpreter will or will not recognise the speaker's intention. Using the hearer's lack of knowledge on a certain topic, for instance, the speaker may decide to withhold information in response to a question or make a false statement without generating an implicature for the hearer. Regardless of whether the interpreter recognises the violation or not, he/she is expected to do the same. Under no

circumstances is the interpreter entitled to provide more information or “correct” the false statement for the benefit of the hearer. A faithful rendition of the original utterance should comply with the tactics of the speaker.

Infringing a maxim

The situation is very different when the speaker infringes a maxim, i.e. fails to observe it with no intention of generating an implicature or deceiving. This can happen for various reasons: lack of truthful or complete information, inability to speak clearly and unambiguously, cognitive impairment, etc. I would suggest that another reason that falls within the category of infringement may be wrong assumptions about the shared knowledge between speaker and hearer. Shared knowledge is very important in communication, as it allows interactants to choose what part of the information they wish to convey will be explicitated and what part will be left implicit. According to Pym (2005), translators use explicitation more than non-translators because they assume a lower level of shared content and want to minimise the processing effort of the other participants. There is a lot of research on explicitation and its types and patterns in translation and not so much in interpreting (cf. Tang 2018). There are also contrastive studies on explicitation and implicitation within the framework of asymmetries between the plane of content and the plane of expression in English and Bulgarian (Alexieva 2010b). However, no summary or commentary of those studies is offered here, since the exploratory objective of this paper is to hypothesise a possible relation between explication/implication and the observance/non-observance of the conversational maxims.

If a speaker assumes more shared knowledge between him/her and the hearer, he/she may choose to provide less explicit information than required to comply with the Cooperative Principle. This may seem like a violation of the Maxim of Quantity, but in fact qualifies as an infringement, because the speaker’s intention is not to mislead. Once the interpreter has identified the non-observance as infringement, he/she has two options: (i) to preserve the same level of explicitation and implicitation in the target language; or (ii) to opt for cooperation and use a strategy of redress by providing a clearer, unambiguous and complete rendition of the original.

It could be further argued that infringement also occurs when a speaker refers to culturally-specific information like geographical names or abbreviations that the hearer may not be familiar with. In this case, the interpreter may need to add information in order to explicitate the meaning and avoid obscurity of expression. For example:

- (4) Земех → the town of Zemen
- (5) КПКОНПИ → Commission for Combatting Corruption and Confiscation of Illegally Acquired Property/ Anti-Corruption Commission

In yet another possible scenario the interpreter will have to deal with unintentional factual errors made by the speaker. For example, in a speech at the 2017 Values Voter Summit, US President Donald Trump referred to the governor of US Virgin Islands as the “President of the Virgin Islands.” This error would not qualify as non-observance of the Maxim of Quality, since the speaker tells what he believes to be true. An interpreter would have been faced with the decision whether to repeat the original statement and say “президента на Вирджинските острови“ in the awareness that it is erroneous, thus failing to observe the Maxim of Quality, or correct the original information by saying “губернатора на Вирджинските острови“ and comply with the maxim. In order to reconcile between observing the maxim and being faithful to the speaker, interpreters usually convey the referential meaning of the original, adding “as/so the speaker says”.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of interpreting as a communicative act has brought to light various facets of interpreter-mediated events stretching beyond verbal interaction. Based on the discussion, one can conclude that interpreters should be able to understand not only the verbal message but also other elements in a communicative situation, like the setting, type of event, participants and the relations between them. This highlights the importance of communicative competence as part of the overall interpreting competence. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated through examples that the strategies for rendering individual utterances may feature omissions, additions or transformations that are not necessitated by interlingual asymmetries, but are interpreters’ conscious decisions. The aim of the discussion has been to show that the choices interpreters make when at work are determined on a macro level and take into account not only the propositional content of the utterance but also the faithful rendition of pragmatic force. Finally, the analysis of interpreting strategies to convey implied meaning within the framework of the Cooperative Principle may encourage more elaborated research into the pragmatic aspects of interpreting.

Bibliography

- Albl-Mikasa, Michaela (2012). “The importance of being not too earnest: a process- and experience-based model of interpreter competence”. *Dolmetschqualität in Praxis, Lehre und Forschung. Festschrift für Sylvia Kalina*, edited by Barbara Ahrens, Michaela Albl-Mikasa, Claudia Sasse. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 59–92.
- Alexieva, Bistra (2010b). *Interlingual Asymmetry: Implication and Explicitation in English and Bulgarian (Selected papers)*. Sofia: Sofia University Press.

- Grice, H. P. (1975). "Logic and conversation". *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 3: Speech Acts*, edited by P. Cole and J. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 41–58.
- Hymes, Dell H. (1972). „On communicative competence“. *Sociolinguistics: selected readings*, edited by J. B. Pride and J. Holmes. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 269–293.
- Jones, Roderick (2014). *Conference Interpreting Explained*. 3rd edition. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kalina, Sylvia (2000). "Interpreting Competences as a Basis and a Goal for Teaching". *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 10, 3–32.
- Pym, Anthony (2005). "Explaining explicitation". *New Trends in Translation Studies. In Honour of Kinga Klaudy*, edited by Krisztina Károly et al. Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 29–34.
- Saville-Troike, Muriel (1982). *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Seleskovitch, Danica (2000). "Language and Memory. A study of note-taking in consecutive interpreting" (1975). Translated by Jacolyn Harmer. *The Interpreting Studies Reader*, edited by Franz Pöchhacker and Miriam Shlesinger. London and New York: Routledge, 121–129.
- Setton, Robin (1999). *Simultaneous Interpretation: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Analysis*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Tang, Fang (2018). *Explicitation in Consecutive Interpreting*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2018.
- Thomas, Jenny (1983). "Cross-cultural pragmatic failure". *Applied Linguistics*. 4/2, 91–112.
- Vinay, Jean-Paul and Jean Darbelnet (1958/1995). *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Алексијева, Бистра (2010а). *Теорија и практика на устнија превод*. Софија: Универзитетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“. [Aleksieva, Bistra (2010a). *Teoriya i praktika na ustniya prevod*. Sofiya: Universitetsko izdanie „Sv. Kliment Okhridski“.]

Гл.ас. д-р Нели Јакимова

Катедра „Англицистика и американистика“

Факултет по класически и нови филологии

Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“

Адрес: бул. Цар Освободител № 15, Софија 1504, Българија

✉ jakimova@uni-sofia.bg

Senior Assist. Prof. Nelly Yakimova, PhD

Department of English and American Studies

Faculty of Classical and Modern Languages

Sofia University „St Kliment Ohridski“

Address: 15 Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., 1504 Sofia, Bulgaria

✉ jakimova@uni-sofia.bg