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Self-Preservation in Simultaneous Interpreting

Claudia Monacelli

Self-Preservation in Simultaneous Interpreting

Surviving the role

Claudia Monacelli
Libera Università degli Studi "S.Pio V" Rome

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Preface

Sometimes conference interpreting is considered to be an expensive luxury. The interpreters, it is argued, often perform a service for only a handful of listeners and, these days, everyone should understand English. At the same time they may be seen as semi-automatons, a kind of translating machine performing no more than an automatic transfer process. And when things go wrong and misunderstandings or even diplomatic incidents occur, it is they who get the blame.

The physical conditions in which simultaneous conference interpreters work have no doubt contributed to a widespread impression of remoteness and automatism as characteristic of their work. In the classic conference setting, the interpreter is literally invisible – placed in a soundproof, glass-fronted booth usually orthogonal to or directly behind the sightlines of the receivers of their output. Their voice is heard solely through headphones, disembodied as it were and yet connected in some mysterious way (for the layperson) to what is going on before participants' eyes. The linkage of the interpreters' voice to the ebb and flow of the voice of the speaker who holds the floor, such that pauses, emphases, resumptions and so on are reflected, some seconds later, in the interpreter's output, reinforces an impression that some kind of automatic process is at work. At the same time, especially for those who, having no knowledge of the source language, rely on their interpreters for comprehension of what is being said, there is a magical element, akin to that experienced when witnessing real-time machine translation: just how does it all happen?

Little wonder then that early investigations of the conference interpreter sought to shed light on how this process takes place and more specifically on mental processing: how does the interpreter divide attention between competing stimuli? What is the role of short-term memory? How does "chunking" take place? How do interpreters monitor their output at the same time as processing new input? Is meaning "de-verbalised" in the translation process? Psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic questions such as these generated a fascinating body of research, involving a good deal of empirical experiment and leading to real insights into interpreters' practices and processes. Many of these findings also found their way into training programmes, by way of advice on pausing, on "ear-voice span"/"*décalage*", on the advisability, for example, of shadowing as a training exercise and so on.

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Typically though, the subject of the research was "the interpreter" – as an entity rather than as a person. Research data were quite often assumed to represent "interpreting" in general and "the interpreter" as a unified phenomenon. The interpreter's mind was the focus of attention while contextual factors such as personality, concern for quality, responsiveness to criticism or coping with special situations such as a chairperson interrupting or speaking at the same time as a speech-maker tended to be seen as unhelpful distractions. Indeed, it is fair to say that simultaneous interpreting research has been dominated by studies of cognition and of response to stimuli from its beginnings in the 1950s until quite recently. By contrast, when scholars from the late 1970s onwards began to investigate the activity variously known as community, public service or liaison interpreting, they naturally focused on the salient contextual features of the event: face-to-face interaction, dialogue and a three-party negotiation of turn taking in spontaneous interaction. It soon became apparent that interpreters were full participants in the events in which they acted, that they had their own goals and that their decision making could lead in a variety of different directions, influencing the outcome of the event. Context, in these studies, was now very much to the fore. Indeed, research in community interpreting now regards the interpreter as a social being, in a social context, with wants, desires, needs and instinctive reactions and so on in addition to the institutional goals they seek to serve.

For a while it seemed as if these very different types of interpreting – conference and community, as they were most commonly called – lent themselves to wholly different research questions and forms of investigation. It was not until Ebru Diriker's ethnographic study of 2001, published in 2004 as *De-/Re-Contextualising Simultaneous Interpreting*, that attention was systematically drawn to the professional conference interpreter as a person in a context, actively involved in what is going on, speaking on their own behalf as well as on behalf of those they translate. Now at last evidence is emerging of interpreters not merely fulfilling a normative role, that of automatically and neutrally representing another's talk, but also reflecting and representing their own selves.

It is within this general perspective that Claudia Monacelli's new book considers simultaneous conference interpreters' activity. With her many years of experience as a practising interpreter, she starts from the observation that conference interpreters tend to see survival as being their primary objective. Now what does 'survival' mean in the context of simultaneous interpreting? The image of the tightrope walker has sometimes been used as a graphic illustration of the interpreter's balancing act. Compelled to move forwards at a pace set by someone else, they maintain equilibrium as best they may, compensating for pressures and surges that might push them into the void. The author describes this activity in terms of the theory of self-regulation, a phenomenon observed throughout the natural world. Operating as a closed system, organisms counteract threats to their own stability by deploying their resources in a self-regulating way. This book provides a detailed account of self-regulation as theorised by scholars in other branches of science, and then shows how it operates in simultaneous interpreting.

For, as the author shows, it is in the nature of conference interpreting that the activity itself is constantly face-threatening – to all concerned, including the interpreter. Performance is at all times held up to scrutiny and yet decision-making must be immediate: there is always a feeling of "it's now or never: there will be no second chance". It is interpreters' awareness of this that naturally induces them to seek what the author calls "dynamic equilibrium", a constantly evolving state in which problems are resolved and pressures compensated for in the interests of maintaining the integrity of the system as a whole.

In this book, Claudia Monacelli does not seek to show that interpreters occasionally step out of line by intervening in the communication process. Rather, by taking as her starting point the more visible interventions interpreters make (comments on speed of delivery, on exchanges between the chair and the floor), she is able to explore the interpreter's instinct for self-preservation in an inherently unstable environment. She then seeks evidence in the whole fabric of their output for self-regulation as an underlying principle of interpreter behaviour. Thus she shows us how local-level choices in terms of personal reference, modality, omissions, additions and so on are related to the overriding imperative of professional survival – through face-protective mechanisms such as distancing the self from what is being talked about.

Claudia Monacelli's book derives its credibility from the professional interpreting environment within which it is situated. The subjects – interpreters with many years of professional experience – are involved both at an initial briefing stage (in which professional norms, standards and expectations are discussed) and in a later post-performance de-briefing. In this way, the interpreter's brain is no longer treated as an object on a laboratory table: the subjects are directly involved in the research as people with their own views and attitudes. The primary data of the study are the recorded output of these subjects at work in genuine conference settings. The author's close acquaintance with these environments affords her a privileged perspective from which to observe interpreters' self-regulation. As a professional interpreter of many years' standing she provides in *Self-preservation in simultaneous interpreting: Surviving the role* an insightful and refreshing account of interpreters' behaviour from the other side of the glass-fronted booth.

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February 2008

Abbreviations

IS	Interpreting Studies
TS	Translation Studies
SI	Simultaneous interpreting
AIIC	International Association of Conference Interpreters
SR	Self-regulation
I_1	Subject (Interpreter) no. 1
EVS	Ear-Voice-Span (décalage)
S	Speaker
H	Hearer
MP	Member of Parliament
ST	Source Text
TT	Target Text
EFWP	European Forum of Women Parliamentarians
RT	Relevance Theory
FTA	Face Threatening Act

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Transcription key

[text]	literal translation
text	comments from the Chair or non-primary communicating parties
@	voiced pause
#	end of sentence intonation
/	rising intonation or stress
~	level intonation
-	marks different elements within a text sequence
...	hesitation
:	short pause
::	longer pause
{text}	interpreter's microphone shut, audience hears ST
<cough>	unclear portions of text, non-verbal features
(text)	description of surrounding text (co-text)
°utterance°	utterance spoken relatively quietly
boldface	words spoken with emphasis

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

> *"It's funny how all the organisms are alike. When the chips are down, when the pressure is on, every creature on the face of the earth is interested in one thing and one thing only: its own survival."*
>
> Dr. Iris Hineman (Lois Smith)
> *Minority Report*
> Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks Pictures
> Steven Spielberg, Director (2002)

The claim made by Dr. Lois Hineman, a character in the film *Minority Report* directed by Steven Spielberg, is the underlying thesis of this work. The film is based on a short story by Philip K. Dick, first published in 1956 in the magazine Fantastic Universe. *Minority Report* takes place in a near-term future world, 2054, thus a plausible world for current film viewers. The intriguing manner in which the theme of survival is dealt with in the film offers food for thought in terms of elements that inhabit an immediate and extended context. The film's plot revolves around the Department of Pre-Crime, where police officers and detectives are empowered to act on foreknowledge offered by three 'pre-cogs', visionaries, whose pre-visions make it possible to predict criminal intent. Hypothetically speaking, intentions are tried and punished. As one of the 'thought police' – put in the position of second-guessing what people will do – states at the outset of the film, "committing the crime is a matter of metaphysics". This volume examines the construct of survival (self-regulation) in the professional working environment of conference interpreters and offers a model of context with which to consider moves made within this environment. This work is interdisciplinary, based on studies of self-regulation in other fields, autopoiesis, sociolinguistic studies concerned with contextual matters and participation framework, interactional linguistic politeness and interpreting studies. Adducing evidence from a corpus of authentic situated texts, an explanatory hypothesis for prevailing trends is offered that Spielberg, Dick, and certainly even Dr. Hineman – the inventor of pre-crime – would champion.

The pre-crime system is functionally based on the notion of infallibility. The explanation of why the system works is that the pre-cogs are never wrong. Thus the infallibility of the system. In a sense, the meta-discourse of interpreting, i.e. professional associations, codes of ethics and academic literature, has also represented interpreting along these lines: interpreters guarantee "truth and completeness", "accuracy", and are "impartial" and "objective" (see Diriker 2004: 21). Associations go even so far as to suggest that interpreters identify closely with the speaker, in order for the audience not to distinguish between the interpreter and the speaker (*op. cit.*: 33).

In *Minority Report* John Anderton is the main protagonist operating in the Department. He is depicted as a staunch advocate of pre-crime and supports the notion that "pre-cogs don't see what people intend to do, but what they will do". We soon find out, however, that the film's title refers to a discovery Anderton makes about pre-cogs, and namely that they in fact disagree. In other words, if all three pre-cogs agree, the system is airtight, but if one dissents it is not a perfect system. Having banked on complete infallibility, pre-crime system developers try their utmost to keep this information confidential. They are successful until Anderton himself becomes the object of pre-crime investigation in the film. He stops at nothing to find the minority report in an attempt to save his integrity, indeed to save his very life.

Is it possible to characterize the world of conference interpreting in terms of professional survival?

In drawing conclusions in his study of meaning assembly in simultaneous interpreting, Robin Setton (1998: 199) points out, "Experience and corpus findings suggest that *survival*, then quality in SI, depend on three conditions: [...]" (my emphasis). Indeed most, if not all, professional interpreters would probably agree to place 'survival' before 'quality' as their prime objective on the job. Yet the construct of survival, or 'self-regulation' as commonly known in other branches of science, has never been investigated in Interpreting Studies.

Consider the following cases, both taken from my corpus, where the different layers of social meaning in the source text (ST) compel interpreters to adopt a different alignment or shift their 'footing' (Goffman, 1981). In Sample 1.1 the ST speaker is told to slow down; the speaker interrupts her presentation and turns to entertain an exchange with the Chair.

Sample 1.1 I_5 7–11 ST

	ST	Literal translation
Delegate	plus lentement	more slowly
	OK	OK
	c'est pour gagner des minutes	it is to save some minutes
	ne ne m'enlevez pas mes minutes @ <chuckle>	don't don't take away my minutes @
Chair	*<off microphone> j'en tiens compte*	*I'll take it into account*
Delegate	d'accord	fine

Sample 1.2 I_5 7–11 TT

	TT	Literal translation
Interpreter	la signora dice che correva per guadagnar qualche minuto	the woman says she was running to gain some minutes
	però se corre così non si riesce a seguire	but if she runs like this it is impossible to follow
	grazie	thank you

The interpreter (target text, TT), on the other hand, reports to the audience what the ST speaker says, using the third person (Sample 1.2). She then interjects a comment of her own, using a somewhat informal register ('running', to express rapid speech), and thanks the audience.

In the above example one could surmise the interpreter's need to inform listeners of what the ST speaker and Chair are saying, but why does she address the audience directly with a comment of her own?

In the following Sample (1.3) the ST speaker is a female parliamentarian from Turkey who speaks about the condition of women in her country at all levels. She then also begins to express her views on the condition of Chechen women. Before taking the floor she is told she has only five minutes because another plenary meeting is scheduled. During her talk the Chair tries to interrupt no less than six times before the sequence of utterances in Sample 1.3.

Sample 1.3 I_9 22 ST

Delegate	I would like to express briefly my views on the condition of Chechen women which is a gross violation of human rights
Chair	*Madame I am sorry Madame I am sorry please*
Delegate	Russians I think
Chair	*sorry Madame we have another meeting now*
Delegate	the Russians have been
Chair	*we have another meeting*
Delegate	carrying on
Chair	*they are waiting outside*
Delegate	a huge massacre and genocide in Chechnya the victims are women and elderly

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