

Simoultaneous Interpreting
into English:
the Argentine Case

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Introduction

This project will attempt to shed light on the practice of interpretation into the non-native language in Argentina. An overview of my home country's market situation and the need for Argentine interpreters to work into English will give the reader an opportunity to better understand the issue at hand. The problems derived from interpreting into English will then be analyzed. Questions such as quality, training, ethics and theoretical aspects of interpreting into English form part of this effort of taking a closer look at the market I work in.

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The Situation in Argentina: Brief Overview

The situation in Argentina is a very special one. First, its geographic location –on the tip of South America– has contributed to its isolation. Second, a set of protectionist policies kept it apart from mainstream trends in the world. However, millions of immigrants poured into Argentina from the late 1800's until the 1920's (Monson, *The Life*, 170). Immigrants were mainly European and the interpreters used were people who could speak the language of the immigrant and the local language. Very often, however, no interpreters were available and the immigrants had to communicate as best they could, a situation that evidently brought about problems, such as the transliteration or misprint of names and last names.

The professions of Translator and Interpreter have evolved considerably since that time. Several Argentine universities and vocational training institutions¹ have introduced translation courses, but very few provide interpreter training.

Traditionally, English/Spanish Argentine interpreters were self-taught. Many were "Anglo-Argentines," who had been brought up as bilinguals and in one way or another became involved with translation or interpretation. Others were talented language teachers or translators who started interpreting in an intuitive manner, others were trained by some outstanding professionals and still others (a minority) were graduates of the few institutions and universities that provided interpreter training.

1- Translation and interpretation education in Argentina is provided at university level and at post-secondary education level. The latter is a level of higher education whose graduates are not awarded university-level degrees. Post-secondary education level institutions are known as "Profesorados" or "Traductorados no universitarios". There are also some non-university vocational institutions that provide interpreter and translator training.

Why is it necessary to interpret into the non-native language?

The classification of working languages (A, B, C) proposed by AIIC has been accepted by most professional interpreters.

In Western Europe, it was long thought that interpreters should work only into their A languages in the simultaneous mode of interpreting. It is a well-known fact that conference interpretation requires that the interpreter encodes and decodes the message at very high speeds, thus needing not only a vast vocabulary but also a great command of his working languages (Gile, *L'interpretation*: 304.) According to D. Seleskovitch, the interpreter needs to have a total feel (emphasis added) of the language in order to simultaneously interpret (*Interpreting*: 80.) She is of the opinion, however, that years of experience in the profession, an exceptional flair and a deep knowledge of the terminology in question, may allow the interpreter to do a respectable job of interpreting technical material into his B language (*Interpreting*: 75.) Times have changed since Seleskovitch made such a statement and, above all, the needs of the market have also changed. The need for simultaneous interpreting is a reality in Argentina, and we may even extend this statement to other countries. According to David Snelling, "... it is no longer even important to debate the necessity (as opposed to the desirability) of ...Spanish [and, in my opinion, Argentinean]...interpreters being able to work into English. The laws of the market economy have concluded that debate for us" (*Strategies*: 2.)

Argentine interpreters, therefore, have to work into their "Bs" not only in technical meetings but in all other types of meetings as well.

There are, as some authors have pointed out, some exceptions to the "only into the A language" rule. Borderline cases (Gile, *Basic*: 209) and true bilinguals (Thiéry, *Bilingualism*: 26) fall into this category, for they may –in my opinion– very well work into their active languages in both modes of interpretation. There is another case in which it would be acceptable for an interpreter to work into his non-native language: if he has mastered his B language well enough to be used as a native language, such a language should not be discriminated from an A language (Gile, *Basic*: 209.)

There is yet one more exception to such a rule: market needs. There are certain places in the world that require interpreters to work into their "Bs" in the simultaneous mode simply because there are very few interpreters that have that B language as their A language (Harris, *Norms*: 117.) That is the case in Argentina.

The simultaneous mode known as "two-way" or "retour" interpreting is widely used in Argentina, both because of a market modality and because it reduces costs (Celesia et al., *Actualización*: 2.) "Two-way" interpreting –which is also a common practice in the private market in Europe– means that both of the interpreters in the booth will be working from and into English, for example. The so-called European Union or UN model is that one booth works only into English and the other only into Spanish, for instance.

Another aspect of the above situation is the growing number of interpreter-mediated events that are being held in Argentina. Since the organization of seminars, congresses and talks is currently a very profitable business (Simcovich: Alguas: 1), interpreters are hired in order to provide language services for the audience. In large international congresses and seminars (for instance, those organized by the UN, the OAS or other international organizations) the “one-way” simultaneous interpretation mode is used, and sometimes native English-speaking interpreters are brought in from abroad. Such congresses are, evidently, not very frequent. Smaller meetings and seminars where there are one or two foreign guest speakers/experts are much more common (Simcovich, Alguas: 1.) It is therefore economically impractical (and virtually impossible in Argentina) to hire two booths of interpreters for such meetings. Most Argentine interpreters work in “smaller” meetings and they obviously have to go into their “Bs.”

The Problem

We have briefly discussed the fact that interpreters in Argentina are usually required to work in the two-way simultaneous interpreting mode. A truly bilingual (as defined by Thiéry) professional interpreter’s performance would most likely be of a very high quality in such instance. But are the only bilinguals Thiéry’s “true bilinguals”? I feel François Grosjean’s approach to bilingualism is much more up-to-date: “Bilinguals are not seen so much as the sum of two or more complete/incomplete monolinguals, but as specific and fully competent speakers/hearers who have developed communicative competence that is equal (but different in nature) to that of monolinguals” (Grosjean, *The Bilingual*: 167.) Most good interpreters would fall into Grosjean’s category of bilinguals. Interpreters need not necessarily be Thiéry’s “true bilinguals”. However, they should ideally be as close to Thiéry’s model as possible. Another modern –although rather comprehensive– approach to bilingualism that can be applied to interpreters, is the one proposed by David Snelling “...perhaps the only valid definition of “bilingualism” for interpreting purposes should involve the completion of university studies in both languages” (*Strategies*: 2.).

In addition to being “bilingual”, interpreters should be “bicultural” (Grosjean, *The Bilingual*: 167.) Biculturalism is of the utmost importance in any setting, especially in simultaneous interpreting, where the speaker often makes many cultural references that the interpreter has to understand and pass on to his audience generally at a high speed. There is no regulatory authority (see below) for “conference” interpreters, as there is for court interpreters/*Traductores Públicos*. Almost all the translation schools in Argentina are geared towards training translators, not conference interpreters (although certified translators (*Traductores Públicos*) are expected –and supposedly qualified– to work as court interpreters.) The young graduates of those institutions have no training in interpretation, and they are therefore unfit to work as interpreters.

We then, more often than not, encounter interpreters who are required by market demands to interpret simultaneously into their non-native language, but who do not have the necessary skills to do so. How are we to address this problem? A number of issues have to be taken into account if we want to answer this question.

First, the truth of the matter is that most of the interpretation in small meetings is into Spanish. In smaller seminars and courses, the foreign instructor generally lectures and the only interpretation into the B language is the one performed during the Q & A session. Having said that, we need to remember that many times interpreters are called upon to work in the “whispering” mode (at a board of directors’ meeting, a talk, etc.) Although, as mentioned below, no one else but the person who is being “whispered” to, is listening to the interpreter, a flawed rendering may lead to all kinds of imaginable problems.

Second, most foreign guests expect that, being in South America, they will not find “professional” interpreters, and are therefore content with getting the gist of the matter being discussed. They are thoroughly –and hopefully pleasantly– surprised if the interpreter has a light accent (or no accent at all) and conveys the message in clear, idiomatic English. A number of good professional interpreters have told me that, after working with non-professional interpreters, their clients had told them that they were pleasantly surprised at the professional interpreter’s accurate and idiomatic renderings.

Third, many times there is no one (but the native English client) to check the performance of the interpreter. It is often the case that the client will not complain about the quality of the language service, for several reasons, such as politeness towards the organizers of the meeting, lack of interest in the subject matter or mere acceptance of the fact that the interpretation is mediocre.

Fourth, the interpreter himself is sometimes unable (or unwilling, perhaps?) to acknowledge his limitations when interpreting into his B language and more often than not assumes that his output will remain evanescent (Shlesinger, *Extending*: 114).

Fifth, fewer people listen to and wholly understand the interpretation into English. The possibility of assessing issues such as quality, accuracy and general delivery is, therefore, lower. Basically, only a professional interpreter can listen to two language renderings simultaneously and accurately judge if the arguments developed in the interpretation are the same as those of the original text (Seleskovitch, *Interpreting*: 122.)

Users of Interpretation Services

Usually, organizers of smaller events think about interpretation services at the very last minute, and sometimes view interpretation as an expensive but necessary evil of dubious efficacy² (Gile, *Aspects*: 240.) Such services are generally underbudgeted or not budgeted at all.

2- "...les interprètes...[sont] fréquemment considérés un mal nécessaire, onéreux et d'une efficacité douteuse."

Also, a large number of interpretation users do not realize that good interpretation is possible and that the first requirement is to recruit qualified interpreters (Seleskovitch, *Interpreting*: 121.) It is the interpreter's obligation to educate his clients. Basically, the quality of the interpreter used in a certain meeting depends on the user. The better "educated" the user is, the more quality he is going to demand. Danika Seleskovitch is right when she says that "until delegates become more demanding, a great deal of simultaneous interpreting will continue to be performed by inadequately qualified interpreters" (*Interpreting*: 122.)

The interpreter has to make sure that the users of his services understand that s/he is a language professional and that, as such, s/he expects the same kind of confidence and respect that other professionals receive. As explained by Christopher Thiéry, a professional interpreter is never "the interpreter of one person only [...] He is the interpreter of a given meeting [...] When he accepts his interpretation assignment he has committed himself to faithfully and completely communicate the messages given in the other language"³ (Thiéry, *La responsabilité*: 79.) In other words, he is a professional bound by certain rules.

According to Sergio Viaggio, all professions are governed by rules, which are in turn ultimately subjected to rules of expectation. In professions other than translation/interpretation, such rules of expectation have evolved together with professional rules. Other professionals are deemed experts in their respective fields of practice and have gained the confidence of their clients who –if nothing else– are always willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. Such professionals have achieved their goal after centuries of collective and systematic efforts. Argentina has somewhat acknowledged and protected a specific aspect of the profession by means of the recognition of the professionals known as *Traductores Públicos*, but it has failed to acknowledge translators and interpreters as a whole. This lack of awareness by the general public and, to a large extent, by the very users of interpretation services has resulted in a virtual impossibility to "defend" our profession (No sé: 5-6.) I am aware that it is a young profession, but precisely because of that we have to be instrumental in making people aware of what it is all about and what skills are needed to practice it. Unfortunately, as Viaggio has pointed out, "we have been unable to raise that kind of awareness, so that the rules of expectation that we are faced with are outrageously naïve"⁴ (No sé: 7.) The reason why such rules are naïve is that interpreters have not, as yet, achieved a social status comparable to that of other professionals. The market is made both of non-professional interpreters and highly qualified language mediators. Given the fact that the layperson sees more of the former than of the latter, it is understandable that the general status of the profession tends to be low, because –ultimately– the practitioner's status is determined to a significant extent by its [sic] own behavior (Gile, *Basic*: 39.)

3- "un interprète de conférence professionnel n'est jamais [...] l'interprète 'de quelque'un' [...] Il sera toujours l'interprète de la réunion [...] En acceptant sa mission il s'est engagé à leur communiqué fidèlement, complètement, les messages énoncés dans l'autre langue."

4- "[Traductores e intérpretes]. No hemos podido proporcionar esa instrucción, de modo que las normas de expectativa con que nos toca lidiar resultan exasperadamente ingenuas."

A survey conducted by AIIC in Europe concluded that:

“The ‘ideal’ interpreter speaks in a clear and lively manner but doesn’t go in for histrionics, understands the subject matter of the meeting and knows the terminology, speaks in complete, grammatically correct sentences and enunciates clearly without ‘umming’ and ‘aahing’. Clarity of expression is the quality users rate above all others. The ‘ideal’ interpreter puts faithfulness to the meaning of the original speech above other considerations and in so doing concentrates on essentials rather than trying to reproduce literally everything that is being said. Delivery is regular and, surprisingly high on the list of points raised spontaneously by respondents, the ‘ideal’ interpreter keeps as close as possible to the original. 34% of the interviewees said that they are uncomfortable if the interpreter waits for a long time before starting to interpret, or pauses for long periods during a speech” (Mackintosh, 1998.)

All this may be applied to interpreters all over the world, but we have to place the above assertions in the context where the survey was conducted. All of the interpreters used were AIIC members, working under AIIC-suggested conditions. User expectations seem fairly universal, but do they apply to our clients in Argentina? They might, but until we have supporting data in this regard we cannot be sure. However, the data provided by AIIC describes the “ideal interpreter” that most users would like. This information gives Argentinean professionals a model to which they can refer.

Quality, Ethics and Training

What is quality in interpretation? In my opinion, it is first and foremost the possibility of achieving full communication between two parties who do not speak the same language. By full communication I mean that both parties achieve complete mutual understanding, that is, that they understand each other's message and package (Gile, Basic: 26-27.) However, in simultaneous interpreting it is easier for a delegate to assess the packaging than to assess content (message) because of the speed involved in the process and the impossibility of comparing both the original and the translated texts. This may distort his perception of quality (Gile, Basic: 33.)

So what about quality when interpreting into the non-native language? Here the conveyance of the message is king, so accent [...] and style issues should be overlooked if content and package are being substantially passed on to the message receivers. The native speaker of Spanish will more than likely have a perfect understanding of the source language text even though s/he may express it inelegantly, but that is preferable to an ill-grasped but stylishly expressed message (Snelling, Strategies: 13-14.)

Ethics also come into play when working as an interpreter in Argentina. Article 3a) of the Code of Professional Ethics of AIIC states that “Members of the Association shall not accept any assignment for which they are not qualified. Acceptance of an

assignment shall imply a moral undertaking on the member's part to work with all due professionalism" (aiic.net, Nov. 19, 1998.) These norms are only binding for AIIC interpreters, but they are such a basic set of ethical rules that they should morally bind anyone working as an interpreter.

Since –unlike TP court interpreters– conference interpreters enjoy no legal protection in Argentina, it is of the utmost importance that they work together in order to establish a set of comprehensive and fair standards that will govern their profession.

Does training have a bearing on quality? I believe that it does. The kind of training that is necessary is good training, i.e., one that provides students with the tools needed to make them become good professionals. Or in other words, the kind of training that creates qualified interpreters who are immediately operational upon graduation (Gile, *Basic*: 256.)

As regards the candidate selection system an explanation is in order. Many of the Argentine translator and interpreter training centers lack an appropriate entrance examination. If entrance exams are fair but rigorous only qualified candidates will become students. This will, among other things, reduce the overcrowded classrooms and result in a better quality of training.

With the increased need for interpreters in Argentina, more attention will be paid to interpreter training in the future. There are some practitioners who have been trained overseas and who have become excellent teachers. There are other self-taught interpreters who have designed excellent private training courses. Having said that, I still think that conference interpretation training should preferably –and ideally– be conducted at the postgraduate level (Gile, *Basic*: 256.)

Starting university exchanges with interpreter training centers of the English-speaking world could resolve the lack of native English-speaking instructors. To my knowledge, such exchanges are virtually non-existent in Argentina. If instituted, they would not only enable students to receive better training, but also provide Argentine instructors with a mutually beneficial academic interchange. Student exchanges are also a way to promote international understanding and cultural feedback. Argentina is, in this regard, a very isolated country and, these "linguistic exchanges" could somewhat reverse this situation.

Some Theoretical Aspects Of Interpreting Into The Non-Native Language

The spontaneity of the native language is responsible for the speed at which a message can be retransmitted, as well as for the clarity of its interpreted form (Seleskovitch, *Interpreting*: 100.)

Interpreting into one's A language requires a totally different approach from interpreting into one's B language. There are very few linguistic mediators who admit to working with equal ease into and from a given language; most interpreters prefer to work into the languages in which they have conducted their university studies (Snelling, *Strategies*: 2.)

Another aspect of working into the non-native language is what has been termed lexical restriction. The availability of words is presumably more restricted in the B language than in the A language (Gile, *Basic*: 226.) If we add to this the time constraints and speed that usually accompany simultaneous interpretation, it is easy to understand why the Spanish interpreter going into English almost always has a difficult task ahead of him. A very interesting study conducted by Valeria Darò revealed that “a particular type of mistakes, i.e., those leading to loss of information⁵, occur during active simultaneous interpretation (i.e. from A to B) of difficult texts⁶ (Darò et al., *Conscious*: 101.) This study involved French/English bilingual interpreters.

Another problem that arises when the interpreter is “going into his B” is interference. A very good command of the B language and of interpretation techniques, as well as a perfect understanding of the message can minimize the adverse effects that interference can have on communication. When the interpreter does not have such skills, he tends to “parrot” the speech into his B language, thus making his rendering very hard –or even impossible– to understand. Any interpretation (either passive or active) carries with it the need for the interpreter to fully understand and process the message. Only then will he be able to “pass it on” to his audience. Upon listening to the original speech, the interpreter expresses his own thoughts and forgets the speaker's words while absorbing the entire message (Seleskovitch, *Interpreting*: 101.) Furthermore, such skills will also permit him to more effortlessly render the message. However, they can only be acquired through conscious effort and training designed to find a specific solution to a specific problem (Snelling, *Strategies*: 4.)

Conclusion

I decided to analyze the issues above in an attempt to understand how my own training had to be addressed in order to adapt it to the needs of the Argentine market.

The research also made me think of ways in which the problems that I found could be tackled. My findings prompted me to develop a set of suggestions that could be instrumental in improving the current quality of active simultaneous interpretation in Argentina:

- Establish rigorous but fair entrance exams to translator/interpreter training centers so that only candidates with the required language skills are accepted.
- Provide adequate training in interpretation to the non-native language, preferably at the postgraduate level.
- Promote teacher and student exchanges with qualified interpreter training centers of English-speaking countries.

5- Under this heading, four types of errors were grouped: mistranslations, imperfections (i.e. imprecise and/or inaccurate translation), calques and omissions.

6- 12 microtexts made up of relative clauses, which are harder to understand and put a heavier load on the interpreter's processing system.

- Educate users of interpretation services and the public in general about what interpretation into the non-native language really entails.
- Increase the qualified interpreters' professional status through quality renderings.

There are many qualified interpreters in Argentina who are interested in seeing their profession grow. I hope all practicing professionals can contribute to that endeavor.

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