

Specialisation in Interpreting  
and Translation:  
some Considerations  
from a “Liaison Interpreting”  
Perspective

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## **Introduction**

This topic may seem a rather strange topic to introduce into the context of this congress, however, I believe that the issue deserves an airing, if for no other reason that its discussion raises issues of professionalism, competence and training; issues which are central to this congress.

Before tackling the question of outlining what is meant by specialization, I would like to indicate the reason that I have chosen to talk about his topic from a "liaison interpreting perspective". I believe that this perspective, as one of the most recent perspectives in the work of an interpreter which have been developed, provides some useful insights into the reasons and the process of specialisation.

I would like to proceed by firstly outlining what I mean by specialization or better still what I believe is meant by specialization when interpreters and translators talk about it, then to give a brief account of the kinds of labels which have been used in the profession to deal with this phenomenon. I will then discuss it in relation to perceived competence, political and social imperatives and finally in relation to professional concerns.

## **Specialisation**

The idea of specialisation can be considered to be along a number of continua.

Firstly within the ambit of bilingual and bicultural competence, let us assume that a bilingual person has decided that the particular characteristic which they have acquired through study or circumstance as bilingual persons can be put to economic use in the capacity of interpreter or translator. This decision represents a kind of specialization; the move from an amorphous, non-contextualised status to a more defined, recognised and remunerated occupational category. (Davies 1991) let us not pause here to discuss the merits of this kind of perceived natural progression; I mention it only because it is still too common for bilingual competence to be confused with T&I competence.

Specialisation can also be seen in terms of separating the two skills which we often consider together, that of interpretation and that of translation. The choice of pursuing a study and career in either interpreting or translating (where that choice is available and realistic) can be a progression in the professionalisation of the individual. It is rare to find that the general clientele is able or wishes to distinguish between the two. The semantic field of the word Translator (with a capital T) includes interpreting and it is only within the profession that the differences between the two skills or processes are discussed and understood; this is not to say that there do no still exist areas of activity within these skills which defy their treatment as a simple dichotomy.

A third way of looking at specialization stems from the desire for differentiation within the profession driven by a number of factors, some of these have to do with the developments in response to local needs, or in response to particular require-

ments dictated by other imperatives (for example sign language interpreting); this differentiation is based on perceived differences between “types” of interpreting and translating as seen by the profession itself and they may not be recognised as such by the clients of translators and interpreters.

It is important to note that in the last ten to fifteen years there has been an increased tendency for our profession to look for differences rather than similarities between the range of activities between the range of activities which can be described as translation and interpreting. This seems to be part of a global trend for professions to create sub-sets of themselves in the form of “specializations”. The other interesting phenomenon which I do not have the time to develop here is the idea suggested by Andrew Chesterman (1997) about “memes” in translation theory, alluding to the development of the same ideas at about the same time by different researchers or practitioners in different parts of the world.

### **The Labels of Specialization**

In order to illustrate the issue of differentiation it is interesting to note the number of labels that have been used for that purpose.

In interpreting, for example, one talks about conference, court, consecutive, sign language, ad hoc, community, liaison, business and public service interpreting. In translation one talks of abstract, extract, localization, adaptation, revision, web translation, literary translation, poetry translation. And then there are some other labels which do not fit neatly into either category; some of these are sub-tilting, sur-titling, voice-overs, opera translation, sight translation, transcription translation etc.

Each of these labels attempts to draw attention to some element of the process which it sets apart as requiring particular treatment. Difficulties emerge because the labels are highlighting different aspects of the professional work of the translator and interpreter. Let us just take some of the interpreting examples: some highlight the context in which the interpreting occurs (e.g. conference interpreting, business interpreting, public service interpreting) some highlight the technique applied at that particular time (e.g. consecutive interpreting, simultaneous interpreting), some indicate the relationship between the interlocutors (e.g. liaison interpreting) some indicate the way in which the interpreting is viewed (e.g. ad hoc interpreting) – I shall return to these later.

What is it that makes these specializations? In my view they cannot be considered to be specializations in the same way as other professions consider specializations; for example the concept of a general practitioner and a neurosurgeon; that of a lawyer and a commercial lawyer differ in that there is an expectation that more knowledge or more in-depth knowledge is acquired in the process of that specialization. In our case the process is clearly different because it does not involve solely a greater knowledge, or a more in-depth knowledge of some facet of the profession. I would like to examine the process from three points of view – that of per-

ceived competence, that of political and social imperatives and also from the professional perspective.

### **Specialization and Perceived Competence**

At the most basic level this aspect involves what Gile (1995) has called "Knowledge Base" i.e. the consideration of the level of knowledge of the subject matter required for the interpreter not only to interpret but to achieve in his/her output a credibility which is not going to destroy the confidence of the clients in the interpreter.

Just exactly when and how this is acquired is not very clear; in fact there are various approaches to this problem.

The first is that the interpreter over time increases the "knowledge base" by means of acquisition of knowledge in the preparation and conduct of a number of assignments until such time as a level of credibility is reached which is sufficient for the needs of the clients. There is, in other words, a credibility threshold which must be attained. It is argued that this threshold need not and cannot be at the same knowledge base levels as the clients. The opposite viewpoint insists on training in a particular field as a prerequisite to training in interpreting and translation in order to minimize the problems of credibility. These points of view have given rise to quite specific and concrete recruitment policies; for example in Indonesia there is a very large textbook translation program organised by the government. It is their express policy that the translators be subject matter specialists first. There is probably not a single approach to this particular issue but my view is that a translation can always be checked by an expert in the field.

An important consideration in this issue of subject matter competence is that the interpreter or translator is often exposed immediately to the minutiae of a discipline without the benefit of an overall appreciation as to where the matters under discussion or being translated fit in. Thus knowledge acquisition cannot be assumed to occur in a linear fashion, building upon a general knowledge base.

### **Specialization and Political and Social Imperatives**

The factors which lead to the creation of specialization are market demand and availability of expertise, as well as the increase in the overall "content" of the profession brought about by study, research and practice. These factors even affect one of the most fundamental issues in translation and that is, the direction of translation practice into a second or non-native, non-A language.

In some parts of the world, such as Hong Kong, for example, translation into English by native speakers of Chinese is commonplace. I am certain that this occurs in many other places, however it will be interesting to examine this issue in a few

years when the practice of globalized translations transmitted via e-mail have had a chance to be utilized in a larger number of countries.

The availability of expertise is particularly important when one moves outside the few languages spoken by a large majority of the world's population. Languages such as Dari, Vietnamese, Turkish and Tamil, for example, take on a degree of importance in Liaison Interpreting in Australia, which is much greater than their relative importance in terms of absolute numbers of speakers. This is because the social imperatives associated with people's rights to participate in the community has led to the use of these languages in Australia, in conjunction with English, in the interpreting and translating field. It is clear, though, that expertise in this area has to be built up according to demand, thus to expect a Turkish translator to work only into Turkish in Australia would be an unrealistic expectation and would not be tolerated by the political system, which, as an outsider to the profession, is not interested in what seems a fine detail, that is, that only translation into native language is preferable. If you add to this the corollary of the argument, i.e. that the number of native English speakers whose proficiency in Turkish approaching that which is required, is very small indeed, one can perhaps see how the profession is thus shaped by external factors of market demands and social imperatives. Even if we see this as undesirable the alternative of leaving people without the possibility to communicate is even more undesirable. The above example can be and is repeated in other language communities around the world where the stock of bilinguals is small and whose language is not one which has currency outside a single country. Korean is a case in point. This is another stratum which needs to be mentioned here and this refers to indigenous languages or more correctly languages of indigenous populations. I am thinking of the Inuit, the Sami, the Australian Aborigines and other peoples in other continents.

In the case of indigenous languages, as political situations shift and interpreting services become the norm for these languages, additional problems to the ones I have outlined above for particular languages, will need to be dealt with.

In the same way that I have illustrated the difficulty of maintaining the practice of translation only into native tongue, so does the issue of subject-matter specialization apply in these situations. It stands to reason that if the demand is low, for an interpreter or translator to make a living, they need to spread their practice across a number of subject-matter areas. This leads into a discussion of specialization from a professional perspective.

### **Specialization from a Professional Perspective**

The different labels which can be said to correspond to as many specialization as seen by the profession, have developed over a number of years at different points in time in response to locally perceived needs. For example, the trigger for the widespread use of simultaneous interpreting at conferences was the Nuremberg trials.

The different levels of remuneration which are attached to each of these labels are more an accident of history than an indication of the monetary worth of each. As is normal in every profession, a hierarchy has emerged in our profession as well, based on factors which, in my view, have little to do with professional issues.

Taking into consideration interpreting first, it is instructive to look at the commonalities before exploring the differences in some of these labels. In each case there is the oral rendition of speech heard in another language. In some cases this is done simultaneously (or what we call *simultaneously*) in other cases it is done consecutively. In some cases it is done using audio transmission equipment, in others it is done directly. In some cases it is done in a booth, in others in a courtroom. The commonality of the two activities is often glossed over because of professional jealousies. If the aim of any interpretation is to render accurately the message –and I use the word “message” advisedly– then this common aim should be the one emphasized. It is for a subsequent analysis to discover the differences and integrate them into a professional profile. The arguments become a little more difficult when we look at more recent “versions” of the profession which have demands which are additional to those hitherto expected of interpreters and translators.

Take for example sub-tilting where considerations of a technical nature such as the space available on screen versus the continuity of the action calls for special treatment of the language. Or in localization where the number of extra-linguistic factors which need to be considered is greater.

From the professional practice viewpoint, the creation of specializations needs to proceed as a result of much better research into our profession. It seems that within the title of this congress, “From Babel to Internet” lies the essence of what I mean. I believe that we need more work to analyze what is occurring within the profession and to separate in such analysis three elements which I think are crucial: the first is that which distinguishes our profession from other professions and which has been called many things by many scholars, which, for the sake of brevity, I shall call “TRANSFER COMPETENCE”, i.e. the ability to transfer a message from one communication system into another. Specialization in the usual sense of the word would involve advances in knowledge and differentiation of tasks within this “transfer competence” dimension. A lot of research has been done to describe and understand this phenomenon but as far as I can see no new “version” of this has been developed. The second element for analysis is the “knowledge base” element which I have already mentioned. However the question I wish to pose is “Is an increase of subject-matter knowledge which is used in interpreting assignments or translations, a legitimate reason for creating specializations within the profession such as medical interpreting or court interpreting?” In other words what is the relationship between the professional as opposed to the “situational” outcomes of much specializations.

The third element is what I can group under tools of the profession. Here we have had a massive increase in interest in the last few years. Some of the developments have caused or should have caused us to reflect on how some tools are actually changing or have the potential to change the nature of the profession in its

fundamental element of “transfer of message”. The question here is what influence are we in the profession able to exercise in these developments? Are we content to be pushed along in the issue of translation memories and copyright, for example? Are we happy that the work of adapting texts, however defined, could be considered as a specialization in our profession?

In summary, I have raised some issues which are relevant to a profession like ours at the present stage of its development. This is a young profession comparatively speaking and I believe that the issue of specialization is an issue which has the potential of uniting us in presenting to the world, through our clients, our professional expertise but I also fear it has the potential of taking us down the road to fragmentation where the most important element of our work is lost amongst more trendy considerations.

## ***References***

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