Book Review

Conference Interpreting Explained

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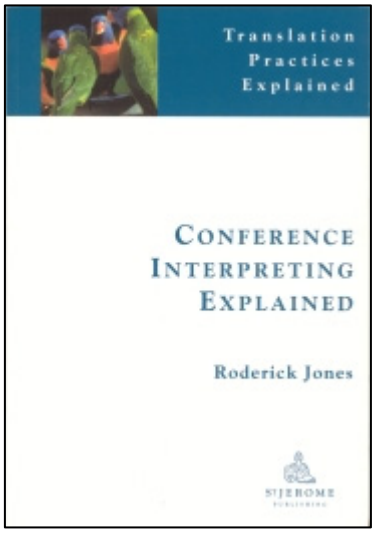

Conference Interpreting Explained

Roderick Jones

Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, second edition 2002. ISBN 1-900650-57-6, 142 pp, 24.5 cm x 17 cm, paperback.

Translation Practices Explained series. Series editor: Anthony Pym.

For the last fifteen years or so, interpreting has firmly established itself as a full-fledged profession separate from translation. Despite being older than translation (people interpreted before they translated), interpreting has always been somewhat confused with translation, and interpreters have for a long time lived in the shadows of translators. The general assumption in the community of users and society is that if one could translate one could easily interpret (and the reverse is true).

This has also been the case for many practitioners, who by chance or design have practised both forms of mediated communication with varying degrees of success and skills. In some languages such as Arabic, the distinction between interpreting and translation is even further confused by a stubborn unwillingness to use distinct terms to refer to translation and interpreting as separate tracks and treat them as distinct professions or specializations within the same profession. The reasons are several, but one distinct possibility is the developmental path both translation and interpreting follow in different countries to respond to different communication needs.

The debate at the inaugural meeting of the British Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) in 1986 brought the message home regarding the use of "translating versus translation" and interpreting versus interpretation" in the

Institute's appellation, and underscored the importance of the distinction between the two tracks.

Tremendous work has been done since those early days. In Australia for example, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) has enforced two distinct categories of accreditation for interpreters and translators in the marketplace, and there is now greater awareness of the difference between interpreting and translating in both the private and government sectors. Educational institutions around the world have variably offered training in these distinct yet foundationally overlapping tracks. Notwithstanding, a great deal of mystery and confusion still shrouds interpreting, its different modes of delivery (simultaneous, liaison, consecutive etc) and conditions, within the ranks of practitioners and educators alike (not everyone is a scholar) and among users of interpreting and translating services. In some quarters of the profession, especially where it is primarily community-based, as is the case in Australia, interpreting is regarded as inferior to translation by many translators. Lack of awareness, training and exposure as well as the vaporous nature of most interpreting work that goes unrecorded, significantly contribute to the invisibility of interpreters, the confusion about their work, and the slow process of professionalization and standardization of professional practices. That is why more interpreting-focused scholarly work by practicing professionals is needed, which brings us to the present book under review.

CONFERENCE INTERPRETING EXPLAINED

Conference Interpreting Explained, by Roderick Jones, sheds the light on one mode of interpreting, namely conference interpreting. Long confused with, or rather restricted to simultaneous interpreting, conference interpreting has not been given adequate attention in the literature on translation studies. There is only a handful of major publications on interpreting compared to translation. In this second edition of the book (the first was published in 1998), the author presents a practical guide to conference interpreting. As Jones explains in the foreword, the book is aimed at four groups of people: interpreting students, teachers, colleagues and the public at large.

INFORMATION ORGANIZATION

The book consists of five well-written, easy to read chapters covering the following topics: conference interpreting, consecutive interpreting note-taking, and simultaneous interpreting, with a postscript on The Pleasure of Interpreting.

In chapter one Introduction, the author addresses the question of what is an interpreter, looking at the role of the interpreter as an explainer who is "called in to *explain* [emphasis in original] what each of the participants wishes to say in turn" (4). The interpreter is seen as a teacher whose task is to make sure that the message is genuinely assimilated by the audience. "The interpreter should have something of a pedagogical streak", Jones confirms. This analogy between the

interpreter and teacher turns the interpreter into an active conveyer of messages facing a minefield of surprises.

In chapter two, The Basic Principles of Consecutive Interpreting, the author addresses himself to the key competencies of consecutive interpreting, presenting a three-stage model consisting of understanding, analysis and re-expression. "To express ideas clearly and effectively, you must first have them clear in your mind", declares Jones in the opening paragraph of this chapter. “It follows that if you wish to re-express someone else’s ideas without having the possibility of repeating them word for word—which is the case for the interpreter—then you must make a clear, structured analysis of them. And to make that analysis you have to understand the individual ideas that are the basic building blocks of a speaker’s line of reasoning,” he adds. Each stage in the model is supported by examples. Analyzing speech types is crucial to thought and sentence pattern recognition; the author dedicates a good section to discussing this aspect. The interpreter must pay particular attention to the logical connections between ideas.

Chapter three is dedicated to note-taking in consecutive interpreting. Note-taking is a real nightmare for interpreting students and a frustrating skill to teach for most interpreting teachers. Transitioning the students from the form of note-taking they have used for lectures and presentations at school and university to note-taking for interpreting is not an easy task, and many a good interpreting student, with great potential for consecutive and other modes of interpreting, finds it extremely difficult to come to grips with this form of note-taking. The reason for this probably lies in the emphasis given by interpreting teachers to note-taking and the perceived silver-bullet effect that note-taking seems to have acquired among students desperately trying to become “true interpreters”.

To this end, Jones cautions that if the essential part of a consecutive interpreter’s work, which consists of understanding, analysis and re-expression, is not done correctly, "the best notes in the world will not make you a good interpreter" (39). He cautions interpreters who invest too much in their notes that they run the double risk of turning their notes into a form of shorthand, that may influence the interpreter’s rendition, and of losing concentration on understanding and analyzing the speaker’s utterances. After giving hits and tips on what to note, Jones presents a set of techniques based on Rozan’s method of note-taking for interpreting (1956), which has been widely adopted by interpreters and interpreting trainers across the profession. A good section in this chapter deals with the language in which to take notes. The practical, sound advice and flexible approach offered are commendable. At least one handicap with Rozan’s method is its euro-centricity. While it is sound in principle, it does not lend itself readily to non-Latin based languages such as Arabic, Japanese and Chinese, especially if the interpreter chooses to take notes in these languages. I am mindful of the fact that the book is about explaining rather than critiquing consecutive interpreting, but an explanation of the limitations of this method

would have been in keeping with the enlightening approach observed in this book.

In chapter four Simultaneous Interpreting, the author draws a comparison between consecutive interpreting and simultaneous interpreting and stresses the unchanged essential nature between the two modes of delivery, advising against falling into the trap of becoming cut off from the meeting in simultaneous interpreting due to the physical isolation in a sound-proof booth. Jones cites two fundamental differences between simultaneous and consecutive interpreting: acoustic and intellectual, and suggests that techniques have to be developed in simultaneous interpreting to cope with these two types of difficulty. Efficient use of equipment, cultivating split attention, and listening to oneself in simultaneous interpreting are discussed and explained. A set of "golden rules" is listed. The last section in this chapter deals with techniques of simultaneous interpreting: when to start speaking, reformulation, the Salami "slicing" technique, simplification, generalization, omission, summarization and recapitulation, explanation, anticipation, and so on. The discussion is supported by good examples, clear explanations and exercises, leaving no doubt that the author is master of his craft. You may agree or disagree with some of his suggestions, but such is the nature of a profession that is coming together through a synthesis of a diversity of experiences and theoretical frameworks, while allowing room for individual differences.

The author concludes his book with chapter five The Pleasure of Interpreting. Reflecting on how interpreters are viewed by the public and how we see ourselves as interpreters, and the immense social and intellectual pleasure of establishing communication between people. The analogy between the interpreter and the chess player drives the message home for most interpreters. How to be one step ahead of the speaker, to speak without having heard the totality of what the speaker intends to say, to anticipate through thought and language pattern recognition, and to map out the discourse intuitively surpasses anyone's expectations of an intellectual pursuit imbued with pleasure.

WRITING STYLE

One striking feature about the writing style in this book is its fluctuation between the second person and third person for no apparent reason except perhaps to cater for the needs of the four categories of readers defined at the outset. Another register-defining feature is the colloquial usage of the plural reflexive pronoun to refer to singular nouns. Inclusive writing would have been more effective using other less annoying and less affected grammatical forms. Instances of ambiguities caused by unjustified ellipsis, such as "In simultaneous [interpreting,] interpreters need to be able to express themselves in short, simple sentences" jolt comprehension, and the reader is forced to re-read the sentence. These stylistic idiosyncrasies are of a restricted nature.

DESIGN AND NAVIGATIONAL FEATURES

The book is set somewhat as a report or thesis, thus diminishing the effectiveness of its frame of reference as an accessible book catering for the information needs of four categories of users. Chapters are marked as such only with a weak numbered title that is not clearly distinguished from the rest of the headings throughout the book. The contrast between headings and body text is poor. Contrast between the various elements of the design to provide a better frame of reference, font size weight, balance or even distribution of weight on each side of the vertical axis, and dominance, which gives the eye a starting point, more appropriate for chapter headings, are not utilized effectively to make the book more accessible and navigable. Locating a chapter becomes a cumbersome task, and the reader has to refer to the table of contents to locate the page number. In this manner, the book design does not provide easy access to the book's contents, especially if the book is to be used as a reference for students, teachers and practitioners. Every time I read this book, I had to use five bookmarks to mark the chapters.

Yet the book is rich with hints and tips derived from the author's own practical experience as a staff interpreter for one of the institutions of the European Union and his reflection on his own work. The author modestly declares, “I write only as an interpreter, not as an academic, a theorist or a researcher in the field of translation studies”, which makes the book all the more relevant to the profession.

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