
The Sense of Situation in Conference Interpreting

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What makes a consecutive interpretation suddenly come alive? How is it that with more or less the same words two students can produce such different performances, the one conveying a message, the other not? After years of trying to help students to teach themselves how to interpret I have come to the conclusion that part of the answer lies in what could be called “the Sense of Situation.”

I am not forgetting the obvious reasons for an unconvincing performance: If the interpreter doesn't sound as if he understands what he is saying the audience won't either, nor will they care; if he starts his sentences without knowing where they are going to lead him, if he simply “reads” his notes, if he mumbles to himself without looking up, if he speaks as if what he has to say cannot possibly be of any interest to anyone, then we all know that the result will not be a professional performance. I feel however that in addition to these—and other—well known and often quoted methods of losing one's audience there is another thought that would be worth exploring, because it might help students to get their message across: the suggestion is that the budding interpreter should make a deliberate effort to be constantly aware of the situation he is operating in, or, to quote (part of) a well-known limerick: “Who is doing what, and with which, and to whom?”

We spend a large part of our active life in “situations.” Every contact with another human being is a situation, with its setting, its protagonists, its hierarchy, its power structure, etc. Most of the time, however, we are too bound up in our own problems to take an outside view of what is going on, to “take stock of the situation.” We tend to lose our tempers at subordinates who are in no way respon-

sible for the cause of our irritation and who have no power to correct matters. We often ask questions of people who clearly do not have the information we want. And we often ply people with information which is useless, indeed meaningless, to them. In all these cases we have failed to assess the situation we are in; we have not asked ourselves "Who is talking to whom, to what purpose, and with what possible effect?" The curious thing is that often it is we ourselves who set the scene without realizing it. In France, for instance, if you greet an usher, or a postman, or someone behind a counter with "bonjour Monsieur" you will probably get back a fairly curt "bonjour." Say "bonjour," and you will get a polite "bonjour Monsieur." (It would be interesting to try similar experiments in other parts of the world.) By our opening gambit we establish the relative power situation, at any rate for the initial phase of the encounter. This is something we do all the time, but usually without being aware of it. In this "experiment" we do it deliberately and thereby control the situation.

A good example of how to control a situation is found in a true tale about A. T. Pilley, whose name will be familiar to some of the readers of this publication. Way back in Salazar's Portugal a grand reception was to be given in the Presidential Palace in honor of the participants to a congress for which Pilley had organized the interpreting team. At about the time the reception was due to begin, Pilley met a couple of young female colleagues wandering about the streets of Lisbon. "Aren't you going to the reception?" he asked them. "We are not invited," they replied. "No problem! Come with me," he said. And he escorted them to the gates of the Palace, where they were immediately stopped by a uniformed guard and asked for their invitation cards. Upon which Pilley announced, with great authority and a reassuring tone, "It's quite all right, they're with me," and marched them past the checkpoint up the Palace steps. Those who knew Pilley will have guessed that, of course, he hadn't an invitation either . . . but he had, in a masterly fashion, judged the situation and controlled it. Had he asked for permission to enter, he would have appeared, in the eyes of the guard, as a person wielding less clout than he, the guard, and who therefore should clearly not be allowed in. And in any case, the guard had no authority to grant such permission. But Pilley, by establishing through his attitude that he was the one holding authority, not only appeared as having more power than the guard,

but also as being in a position to relieve him of any responsibility for the young women.

All this goes to show that when we take the trouble to look at the situation, we find ourselves in a better position to act efficiently. The suggestion is that by the same token the teaching of conference interpretation could possibly benefit from a more systematic approach to situation analysis than is usually the case.

Students could usefully be invited to consider: (1) the interpreter/group situation, i.e., the position of the interpreter vis-à-vis the people he is working for; (2) the group situation itself, i.e., the relative positions of the members of the group vis-à-vis each other.

(1) In most conference interpreting situations, the speaker does not address the interpreter, but the people he is talking to. The interpreter is in fact eavesdropping on a conversation, or a communication, that does not concern him and is not addressed to him. I have discussed elsewhere (Thiéry 99–112) the implications of this for the input part of the interpreting process: to get the information he is supposed to pass on, the interpreter will have to rely far more on the verbal elements of the message than the listeners to whom it is addressed, because he will not have access to what is common knowledge to the speaker and his audience. Not grasping all that is not said, he will have to concentrate on what is said, and every syllable of it. Nor will he enjoy the listening comfort afforded by many of the inevitable redundancies in the speaker's utterances.

This is true, *mutatis mutandis*, both for consecutive and simultaneous interpreting.

This is why the art of listening is such an important part of the teaching of interpreters, especially as most people think they have known how to listen all their lives. It is not easy to convince them that a poor performance in consecutive is usually not so much due to faulty note-taking "technique" as to the fact that they were too busy scribbling to listen to the message—all the message and nothing but the message. It is my experience that it helps to draw attention to the fact that eavesdropping is not the same thing as being spoken to, and indeed is not, to most people, a natural way of listening.

(2) The first thing a student must understand regarding the group is that it is a real-time communication situation: what is happening is happening now, among people who are physically present. At any given moment one member of the group will be trying to commun-

icate with others he is actually looking at and who want to get the message straight away. The interpreter's task will be to act as spokesman for the speaker. This, incidentally, is very different from written translation: an interpreter interprets a person, *hic et nunc*, while a translator, in most cases, translates a text, for later use.

Particularly in consecutive interpretation, where the student usually has to overcome natural shyness in order to speak in public, but also in simultaneous, it is important to be conscious of the relationship between the person who is speaking and his listeners. The situation is often complex, and the interpreter cannot be expected to know all about the inner workings of the group, but he must know what the basic relationships are. Is the speaker the boss, or an underling whose boss is in the hall? Who is trying to sell what? How much bad faith is there? Is the information being delivered original, or rehashed material familiar to everyone? (Situation analysis inevitably encompasses not only the power structure but also the action, i.e., the purpose of the communication: information, persuasion, self-advertisement, etc.) It is of course a tall order to expect the conference interpreter brought in for a one-day meeting to obtain all this information, but he should at least try. And what he cannot get by asking, he must learn to feel. The point I am trying to make is that the interpreter should not say, as he too often does, that all this "is none of his business." It is very much his business to be fully alert to what is going on, and for two reasons: it will make him a more intelligent listener, and also a more plausible speaker. And it will help the trainee interpreter to realize that the audience is not interested in the interpreter, but in the speaker's message. And so there is no cause to feel self-conscious.

These brief notes make no claim to originality: many conference interpreters will feel they contain many obvious truths. They do. But as teaching interpreting is more a matter of passing on know-how than knowledge, we must look at all the things that have become second nature to the successful professional. And "sensing the situation" is one of them.