

Neutrality and Fidelity in Interpreting

Noria BELHADJ

University of Chadli BEN DJEDID

El Tarf - ALGERIA -

noria.belhadj@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt at re-visiting the concepts of fidelity and neutrality (or accuracy and impartiality as they are respectively usually termed) in interpreting. Although, both principles are widely acknowledged demands in the professional conduct of interpreters, they remain quite complex and controversial norms in the theoretical discussion on interpreting. In addition to the parallel seemingly existing between fidelity and neutrality, it is suggested that neutrality is utopian and an unachievable goal, in contrast to the Codes of Ethics that have traditionally advocated for the least invasive role when interpreting, thus imperiling the interpreter's fidelity either to the original or target message. A considerable gap appears to exist between interpreters' practices in real life work settings and standards of conduct established on paper. Due to the fact that interpreting is not a single invariant phenomenon, new perspectives in Interpreting Studies seem to increasingly reject the idea of absolute neutrality and highlight the need to revisit the interpreter's role.

Keywords: Fidelity, Neutrality, Interpreting, Codes of Ethics.

Résumé:

Cet article tente de revoir les concepts de fidélité et de neutralité (ou d'exactitude et d'impartialité, tels qu'ils sont habituellement nommés) en interprétation. Bien que les deux principes soient des exigences largement reconnues dans la conduite professionnelle des interprètes, ils restent des normes assez complexes et controversées dans la discussion théorique sur l'interprétation. Outre le parallèle qui semble exister entre fidélité et neutralité, la neutralité est une utopie et un objectif irréalisable, contrairement aux codes de déontologie qui préconisent traditionnellement le rôle le moins invasif lors de l'interprétation, compromettant ainsi la fidélité de l'interprète soit au message original ou au message cible. Un écart considérable semble exister entre les pratiques des interprètes dans leur travail au

quotidien et les normes de conduite établies sur papier. Étant donné que l'interprétation n'est pas un phénomène invariant unique, de nouvelles perspectives dans les études d'interprétation semblent rejeter de plus en plus l'idée d'une neutralité absolue et souligner la nécessité de revoir le rôle de l'interprète.

Mots clés: Fidélité, Neutralité, Interprétation, Codes de Déontologie.

Introduction:

In its simplest definition, a norm is a rule, a standard, or pattern for action. Norms can be defined as regularities of translational behavior. Addressing the issue of norms in interpretation has probably arisen the most significant contributions in the field of Interpreting Studies (IS). Pointing up norms prevalent in the profession of interpreting must have been vital to any discussion of the system of interpreting. Albeit, “a wider significance of the notion of norms lies in the fact that it evokes *ethics*”, (original emphasis) as Marzocchi (2005:96) argues is one inclining distinctive plea.

Ethics, however, can be viewed in a large scope as the respect of certain values, to be achieved by acting in accordance with rules and principles which have developed within a society or were set down by a group for its members. Conventionally, ethical considerations may generate and lead up to human action; they may also be applied as a yardstick against which behavior is measured, according to Kalina (2015: 65).

The professionalization of interpreting urged practitioners to assemble in a multitude of professional organizations which in most parts of the world are not regulated at a central (governmental) level. The issue of interpreters professional organizations, whose role is to sanction the activity both in terms of endorsing the admission of new members and authorizing the manner in which the activity is carried out, through the establishment of *norms* might probably be worthy of further consideration.

A deontology i.e. guidelines of professional ethics is usually developed by members of any profession. Thus, the principles or rules that make up such guidelines are embodied in

codes of ethical and/or professional conduct and are established, in general, by professional associations. All members of an association are obliged to abide by these rules.

The **International Association of Conference Interpreters** - commonly known by its French acronym, AIIC - was founded in 1953 when conference interpreting was still a fledgling profession. When applying for membership, candidates make a commitment to respect AIIC's Code of Ethics and Professional Standards, which are at the heart of a collective effort to promote professionalism and quality.

While most professional codes specify performance levels, for example in terms of 'fidelity', 'accuracy' and 'completeness', their main concern is with practitioners' ethical conduct as members of the interpreting profession. Pöchhacker (2004:147) reaffirmed that "the more narrowly construed professional role generally prescribes accurate, complete, and faithful rendition and proscribes any discourse initiative on the part of the interpreter, who is conceptualized as a 'non-person' in a neutral position between the interlocutors".

In point of fact, certain commonalities can be found in the world of interpreting as counterbalance to the non-existing one governing body or unified code of ethics for all interpreters across all sectors and branches of interpreting. Bancroft (2005:18) when resuming the largest survey of existing codes yet conducted identifies a number of CORE CONCEPTS OF ETHICS AND STANDARDS, among which these three: Confidentiality, Accuracy and/or Completeness, and Impartiality/Neutrality are universal or widespread ethical principles; whereas, Competence, Conflict of interest and Integrity are considered nearly universal.

Nevertheless, Pöchhacker (2015:146) notes on interpreting standards that: "COMPETENCE, integrity and confidentiality - are fairly clear - cut, while two others - neutrality and fidelity - are more complex and controversial. Finally, *transparency* has been put forward as a key principle in recent literature".

The AIIC Code of Professional Ethics for conference interpreters paradoxically stresses competence, integrity and confidentiality, but does not specifically tackle neutrality or fidelity. Of all those standardized principles, two are quite enticing to be reviewed in this paper, accuracy/fidelity and neutrality/impartiality.

Accuracy/fidelity:

The everlasting debate on fidelity in which Translation Studies remained trapped for centuries, seemed not to be sidelined in early theoretical discussion in IS. The conceptual linkage between fidelity and accuracy was made evident once the term accuracy (i.e. rendering an equivalent message) in Seleskovitch (1978:102) demand for “total accuracy” came as the translation of the original call for “*fidélité absolue*” in her book “*L’Interprète dans les Conférences Internationales*” (1968:166).

Fidelity and its equivalent terms in various languages are associated with notions of trust and integrity, and thus also engage the interpreter’s professional ethics. ‘Fidelity’ is commonly less used in English-language translation studies than *fidélité* in French writing and tends to connote ‘Accuracy’ of reproduction.

Going back to Translation Studies, the concept of fidelity (or at least the translator who was *fidusinterpres*, i.e. the ‘faithful interpreter’) had initially been dismissed as literal, word-for-word translation by Horace. Indeed, it was not until the end of the seventeenth century that fidelity had come to be generally identified with faithfulness to the meaning rather than the words of the authors, according to the conclusions of Munday (2012:40).

The tenet of fidelity (completeness and accuracy) in interpreting goes straight to the heart of the interpreter’s role and is the most universally acknowledged demand, yet, the term is scarcely used in recent literature of IS. Pöchhacker (2004:141) reports that fidelity and accuracy, with the implication of completeness, appear in the literature on interpreting as a widely

accepted yardstick that is applied to measure and quantify interpreters' performance by many researchers. Indeed, most authors tackling the concept have reproduced Herbert's (1952:4) basic tenet that an interpretation "fully and faithfully" conveys the original speaker's ideas.

When establishing her Theory of Sense (the Interpretative Theory), Seleskovitch says roughly that the interpreter grasps the sense beyond words in one language and clads that sense in the words of the other language. Gile (1992:189), who first coined the term Interpreting Studies, added that the interpretation should be faithful to the original both in "message and style". Harris (1990:118) invoked the paradigm of the "honest spokesperson" as a standard for faithfulness. In his view, the interpreter, as the speaker's representative, should "re-express the original speaker's ideas and the manner of expressing them as accurately as possible and without significant omissions".

In a pilot study conducted in Poland, questions concerning norms in interpreting received 60 positive replies among a total of 95 to the already proposed choices in the questionnaire for the norm: 'Faithfull equivalence of messages in the source and target languages', thus, after analysis, concluding that as a rule, interpreters try to faithfully render the content of the utterance, but they signal that making cultural and systematic adjustments cannot be avoided (see The Critical Link 4: 95-106).

Pöchhacker (2015:162) posits that the multidimensional character of fidelity is reflected in the appearance of fidelity, faithfulness, or faithful rendering as a key requirement of professional interpreting in 14 out of a random sub-sample of 16 codes of professional standards, from 9 countries.

Despite the omnipresence of the concept, Gile's (1998) experiment on the variability of fidelity perceptions arises doubts on how interpreters themselves perceive fidelity. Looking at how target speech segments were reported by participants as errors or omissions; among the results, he found that the same TT segments were by no means reported as errors

or omissions by all assessors, and wondered whether they were simply missed or whether the different appreciation reflected different fidelity norms.

By the 1980s, the work of scholars and researchers began to shift from the study of the interpreter's cognitive to a more functional approach. For my own part, the main reason for the shift from using the term "faithfulness" to accuracy, among other inversions, is its technical aspect, and also, in order to avoid being held in the eternal discussion on "fidelity" as was the case for Translation Studies.

Neutrality/Impartiality:

The notion of neutrality is central to the definition of the role the interpreter plays as a person "in the middle" between two different parties. Defining the interpreter's role appears to be a major, if not the dominant, line of contemporary interpreting studies research (Springer 2000:12). It occupies the attention not only of scholars, but also of the interpreters themselves, as Roy (2002: 347) recognizes: "interpreters don't have a problem with ethics, they have a problem with the role."

Although many definitions of this term exist in various dictionaries, encyclopedias and thesauruses, James W. Vice argues that, "Neutrality is not something to be given an explicit and essential definition. Neutrality is not an essence; it is an absence. We must dance around it with enough synonyms and examples to be able to recognize when it isn't present." (Vice, 1997).

Looking into the etymology of the word "neutrality", we see that the term "neutral" is derived from the Latin "neuter", meaning "neither one nor the other". In the Online Etymology Dictionary we read that in the 14th century the term "neuter" acquired the meaning of "neither masculine nor feminine", while as early as the 16th century it referred to "taking neither side, occupying a middle position" (etymonline.com).

The first documentary evidence of the term being used to mean "not taking sides in a fight" (idem.) was recorded in the 1540s, although it most probably existed with a similar sense in

Medieval Latin (*idem.*). The modern meanings of the term “neutral” comprise:

- neither active nor passive
- not taking part in either side of a controversy
- not taking part in a war; giving no active aid to any belligerent
- not being aligned with, supporting, or favoring either side
- belonging to neither extreme in type, kind, etc.; without strongly marked characteristics; indefinite, indifferent, middling, etc.

Traditionally, the concept of neutrality has only been taken for granted in the conduit model, where the interpreter restricts his/her activities to interpreting. From this perspective, the more the interpreter gets involved in the interaction, the less objective he or she is likely to be. In fact, Avery (2001: 10) identifies three categories or models of interpreting; the first one is the conduit model, based on the assumption of a neutral interpreter.

This model would range from the most basic, neutral role, assuming that the only function of the interpreter is to serve as a ‘conduit’ for transmitting a message, to a slightly more active role of the linguistic or communication-facilitator, for example checking that the client is truly understanding what is being said.

Actually, a considerable gap appears to exist between interpreters’ practices in real life work settings and standards of conduct established on paper. Metzger (1999: 1) states that “in discussions of the issue of interpreter neutrality, the anecdotes that interpreters and lay people share suggest that the traditional perception of the interpreter’s role as a neutral conduit of language is at odds with people’s real-life experiences.”

Wadensjö (1992: 273) also describes this seeming contradiction by asserting: “the whole interaction is a peculiar type of three-party talk with the interpreter as one interactant”, she also reports the results of Bakhtin in his essay on speech

genres as he problematizes the concept of neutrality and claims that neutrality of style presupposes similarity between the addressee and the speaker including a unity of their expectations and viewpoints.

Baker–shenk (1991:135) addresses this issue with clear conviction, indicating that there is no such thing as “neutrality” for interpreters. She concludes that it is imperative for interpreters to learn the impact of their choices and to make responsible decisions.

Interpreters are not merely impartial intermediaries facilitating dyadic interaction. Instead, interpreters function as participants within the discourse regulating turns, and altering contributions in ways that are designed to meet interactional goals established by the participants. Metzger (1999: 23).

The lack of fixed parameters and their variance make it difficult to determine a unique way of acting, mainly due to the fact that interpreting is not a single invariant phenomenon, and it takes different forms in different contexts. As Wadensjö (1998:287) highlights, “in practice, there are no absolute and unambiguous criteria for defining a mode of interpreting which would be ‘good’ across the board.” Different activity types with different goal structures, as well as the different concerns, needs, desires and commitments of primary parties, imply various demands on the interpreters.

Despite the evolution in the direction of a more “involved” role model, Kotzé (2014: 127) admits that the Code Model which states that the interpreter should remain as invisible and uninvolved as possible in the communicative act “still enjoys great normative support” as the “correct” role to be accepted by interpreters. In fact, it is not by chance that “those of them who stay within the conduit role tend to label themselves ‘professional interpreters’ (Bancroft 2015: 14).

The traditional models of interpreting that asked the interpreter to become invisible fail in the very first principle of successful communication, that is, to develop trust among all the interlocutors. As Llewellyn-Jones and Lee point out (2014: 9),

“many of the ‘dos and don’ts’ of the prescriptive/proscriptive codes merely serve to inhibit interactions;”

The interpreter’s invisibility is also rejected by Hale (2007: 105), who considers it to be an unachievable goal, an impossible ideal “which does not reflect the performance of real-life practitioners.” Consequently, Roy (2002: 347) makes the point that, while descriptions and standards of ethical practice “extensively, sometimes exhaustively, list what interpreters should not do, they seldom, if ever, explain what interpreters can do, that is, explain what ‘flexible’ means.” Consequently, “no one really knows where to draw the line on the involvement of the interpreter.”

Conclusion:

Most ethical codes employed in the field of interpreting on one hand, call for the faithful accurate rendering of the messages being communicated. On the other hand, impartiality or neutrality is essential in the work of an interpreter. It means the ability to show no bias or exert no influence on parties and give no advice or insert no opinion. Interpreters cannot be faithful if they allow their own opinions, beliefs or agendas to influence the message. Hence, the two principles theoretically complete each other and go in accordance with the abiding standards established by the multiples codes of conduct, practitioners and researchers in the field of interpreting plead for a more realistic and applicable redefinition of the interpreter’s role.

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