

# **Translating vs. Interpreting Interface and Divergence**

Prof. A.B. As- SAFI  
Petra University, Jordan

## **Abstract**

Despite the translating/interpreting interface where both are concerned with rendering a message in the source language ( SL ) into an equivalent message in the target language ( TL ), the two greatly diverge. The constraints imposed on each and the skills required for both vary in many respects. Apparently, a translator performs his task in a written, hence visible, text, with reference sources accessible to him, with the possibility of revising, altering, modifying, editing and polishing the TL version, and in an atmosphere of little stress and relatively fewer constraints. On the other hand, an interpreter, whether consecutive or simultaneous, is deprived of the above facilities, works under very stressful conditions and deals with an oral, hence an invisible, text, in addition to a plethora of other constraints. The corollary is that the interpreter is in a dire need to extra, i.e. compensatory, strategies such as the exegetic or paraphrase strategy, segmenting and chunking, queuing, calquing, approximation, borrowing and ellipsis to enable him/her accomplish his/her arduous feat.

## **1. Introduction**

The ostensible similarity between translating and interpreting has been so popularly prevalent that the word “translator” has become a cover term for both translator and interpreter. A ‘ sworn translator ’, to cite but one example, often refers to a “ court interpreter ”. Furthermore, people sometimes deliberately shun using “interpretation”, preferring “oral translation”, as the former is closely linked to “ exegesis ” or “explication”. To ‘interpret’, according to OALD ( *p. 657* ) is to “ explain something which is not easily understandable”, as in “ to interpret a difficult text, an inscription or somebody’s dream”<sup>(1)</sup>. The meaning of interpretation as an oral translation comes last as “ to give a simultaneous spoken translation from one language to another.”<sup>(2)</sup>

## **2. Translating/Interpreting: Definitions and General Remarks**

Amongst the plethora of definitions of translation elaborately surveyed by Nida ( 1964: 161 – 164 )<sup>(3)</sup>, the following workable one may best accommodate interpreting:

translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.

(Nida and Taber,1969:251)<sup>(4)</sup>

While the reproduction of “ the closest natural equivalent” of the SL message in the TL serves as a common ground or interface of translating and interpreting”, the former is not mainly or exclusively concerned with the accurate, semantic transference. The translated text should, at least ideally and theoretically, be as semantically accurate, grammatically correct, stylistically effective and textually coherent as the source text.<sup>(5)</sup>

On the other hand, we may analogously postulate the following workable definition for interpreting:

Interpreting consists in conveying to the target language the most accurate, natural equivalent of the source language oral message.

The following figures elucidate that translating and interpreting exhibit both interface and divergence. Figure(1) shows the two, as communicative acts, uniting and diverging from one another. Figure (2 ) points to the common and peculiar characteristics of good translating / interpreting. Figure (3) represents a Y-Shape whereby translating furnishes a solid basis for interpreting, especially for pedagogical purposes, as two branches stemming from one trunk. Practically too, it is easier to train a student with a translation background, acquainted and equipped with the basic elements and facts of translation than it is to train one with no knowledge or experience of translation<sup>(6)</sup>. In other words, the skill of interpreting is best acquired after building the twin skill of translation, because the constraints imposed on the former and the requirements needed are far more and greater than those pertaining to the latter.

### **3. Convergent/Divergent Requirements for Translating/ Interpreting Competence**

There are at least five common or interfacial requirements for both translating and interpreting competence vis-à-vis ten for interpreting. The five requirements for competent translators are: mastery or proficiency of SL and TL, thorough knowledge of source and target cultures, familiarity with the topic/ register, vocabulary wealth, and finally awareness of the three-phase process, i.e., SL decoding, transcoding or SL-TL transfer and TL encoding. Interpreting, on the other hand, requires at least five more: short-term memory for storage and retrieval, acquaintance with prosodic features and different accents, quick wittedness and full attention, knowledge of short-hand writing for consecutive interpreting and finally self-composure. Figure (4) evinces the divergent/convergent requirements.

### **4. Translating/ Interpreting Constraints**

The constraints imposed on the interpreters are more and greater than those on the translator. They also vary in type and degree of intensity as regards the direction of translating or interpreting ,i.e., whether from L1 into L2 or the other way round. Below are the main constraints.

#### **4.1. Linguistic Constraints:** They subsume:

##### **4.1.1. Syntactic Constraints.**

The different word order in SL/and TL puts a heavy burden on the interpreter. A case in point is when interpreting a verbal sentence from Arabic into English. The verb may introduce a long nominal phrase. The interpreter has to store the verb and wait for the whole subject before he could retrieve and start the English rendition. Deprived of the sufficient time for manipulation, structural asymmetry often obliges the interpreter to commit pauses and delays among other things.

##### **4.1.2. Semantic Constraints**

These constraints compel the interpreter to exert a far more laborious effort than those originated by syntactic constraints, for as Jackendoff puts it, once one understands the meaning, the syntax follows

naturally and automatically<sup>(7)</sup>. Lexical incompatibility between SL and TL gives rise to slips, hesitations and even pauses, due to the interpreter's struggle with a difficult jargon term, a neologism or a blended word as in interpreting words like Macdonalization or the 1980s Reagonomics.

تطبيق أسلوب شركة ماكدونالد أو الاقتصاديات الريغانية .

To mitigate semantic constraints, the interpreter should be fully familiar with the speaker's topic and/or register.

### 4.1.3 Phonological and Prosodic Constraints

They include features that are non-existent in either SL or TL pertaining to segmental phonemes ( vowels, consonants, consonant clusters, and diphthongs ), suprasegmentals and prosodic features such as stress, intonation, pitch, rhythm and tempo.

## 4.2 Cultural and Phatic Constraints

Many scholars rightly maintain that translating/interpreting is an intercultural communication act that requires bicultural competence to cope with culture specificities whether religious, political or social such *zakat*, *intifada*, *autocracy* and *disco* in addition to institutional nomenclature exemplified in the different compounds with the Arabic *dar* ( house ) as in guesthouse. *دار الضيافة* rest house and *dar al-istiraha* *دار الإستراحة*, Orphanage *dar al- aytam* *دار الأيتام*, Radio/ broadcasting station *dar al-ida'a* *دار الإذاعة*, The hereafter *dar al-baqa'* *دار البقاء* .

Other examples of culture specificities are the modes of address such as Mr. Miss. Mrs. Lord, *خال-a' kh* (brother) أبو Abu or أم Umm plus proper noun as in Abu Ahmed *أبو أحمد* , Umm Ahmed *أم أحمد* or honorary titles such as *معالي ma'ali*, *فخامة fakhamat*, and phatic expressions of courtesy and salutation such as the opening and closing greeting:

*As-salam alaikum wa rahmutul-lahi wa barakatuhu* *السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته*

whose natural equivalent in English could be no more than 'good morning / evening' or 'thank you'

### **4.3 Paralinguistic and Psychological Constraints**

These constraints include the speaker's tone and loudness of voice, the tempo of delivery and gestures as well as the psychological state of the interpreter and/or speaker as regards nervousness instead of self – composure. The laborious task of simultaneous decoding and encoding and his/her concern over accuracy of rendition put him/her in a very stressful situation. The act of interpreting is inversely proportional to the above constraints and to such psychological factors as fatigue, timidity or stage fright for interpreters who have to directly address the audience. The constraints often trigger omissions, hesitations and even time lag.

### **5. Time Lag**

Time lag refers to the time between the interpreter's reception of the speaker's utterance and his/her production. It is ear-tongue or hearing-voicing span. Time lag varies according to the nature of the SL message and the number, type and intensity of the fore-said constraints. For example, the syntactic and lexical complexities and the pile-up of information segments may oblige the interpreter to lag behind the speaker to get a clear understanding, or at least the gist, of the message so as to reformulate it in the TL. Such lag puts a heavy burden on the short-term memory of the interpreter who might inevitably miss the subsequent segments of information and produce poorly cohesive structures and/or rushed sentences.

### **6. Compensation Strategies**

Unlike the translator who enjoys the availability of time and resources, the interpreter is often obliged to have recourse to compensation strategies to ease the burden of constraints, to achieve a smooth performance and fluid ideas and to improve the pace of delivery.

#### **6.1 Syntactic Modification Strategy**

To eliminate or reduce delays and to counter the risk of lagging behind the SL speaker, the interpreter starts simultaneously uttering before he perceives the whole idea. This entails carrying out certain syntactic

adjustments. For example, in interpreting from English into Arabic, the interpreter employs a nominal sentence ( SVO ), usually beginning with the particle *inna* إن rather than the normally preferred verbal sentence in Arabic ( VSO ). By doing so, he would reduce the time required to wait until the speaker utters the verb that might follow a long noun phrase with sometimes embedded phrases and clauses, e.g.,

On Nov. 1, after a month of clashes, Faris's cousin, Shadi, a young man who had resentfully joined the Palestinian police was killed in a confrontation in Gaze. (International Herald Tribune, Tuesday, December 12, 2000 ).

في الأول من نوفمبر ( تشرين الثاني ) وبعد شهر من المصادمات فإن ابن عم فارس، شادي وهو شاب التحق مؤخراً في الشرطة الفلسطينية قتل في مواجهة في غزة.

Other examples can be cited in the anaphora/cataphora in English and Arabic and masculine gender of common nouns, e.g.,

Coaches are indispensable for training sport teams. The new coach has a long experience with international teams in many European, Asian and African countries. She coaches the tennis team at the weekend.

المدرّبون لا يستغني عنهم في تدريب الفرق الرياضية، والمدرّب الجديد ذو خبرة طويلة مع فرق عالمية في عدة أقطار أوروبية وأسيوية وأفريقية، إنها / وهي تدرب فريق التنس في نهاية كل أسبوع.

## 6.2 Segmenting and Chunking Strategy

The interpreter resorts to this strategy when the SL speaker utters a lengthy sentence which has to be 'sliced' into sense units so as to cope with the short-term memory. Conversely, he may combine short sentences into compound or complex ones.

## 6.3 Lining up or Queuing Strategy

According to this strategy, the interpreter delays rendering a less significant information segment amidst a heavy load period of piled up information and then catches up in any lulls that occur later. ( EI- Shiyab, 2000; 556 )<sup>(8)</sup>. This strategy may assist the interpreter to reduce lag, but the delayed segment may not be cohesively compatible with the whole flow of delivery and thus may disrupt the thematic progression.

## 6.4 Calquing Strategy

To mitigate the effects of time constraints and to avert any anticipated lexical difficulty, the interpreter may imitate the SL lexical patterns and collocations and hence produce a literal, ‘verbatim’ rendition, e.g,

هذه الحادثة تختلف عن غيرها من الحوادث، فهي تتميز عما سبقها من الحوادث في  
خطورة نتائجها.

*Haathhi al-haadithati takhtalifu ‘an ghayriha min al-hawaadithi fa-  
heya tatamayzu ‘amma sabaqaha min al-hawaadithi fi khutoorati  
nata’ijiah*

### **Interpretation:**

This incident is different from other incidents, for it is distinguished from previous ones in its gravity of consequences.

### **Translation:**

This incident, unlike others, has unprecedented consequences.

## 6.5 Paraphrasing Strategy

Contrary to the above strategy ( 6.4 ), the interpreter may resort to paraphrase in encountering a SL culture-specificity, hence it may be rightly, called “ Exegetic Strategy ” e.g, الطواف *at-tawaf* going round *AL-kaaba*; running between *Safa* and *Marwa* during السعي *as-sa’i*, pilgrimage, demagnetize المغناطيسية UK, يزيل الخصائص المغناطيسية .

## 6.6 Approximation Strategy

When the interpreter does not find a direct TL equivalent or fails to remember it, he can produce an alternative that has common semantic features, e.g,

opium poppy *mukhadiraat* مخدرات ( drugs ) instead of *khishkhaash* الخشخاش

## 6.7 Borrowing Strategy

To cope with the speaker and maintain a rapid pace of delivery, the interpreter may have recourse to loan words through transliteration, e.g.,

## 6.8 Ellipsis Strategy

It is a strategy of reduction whereby some SL words are deleted when they are believed superfluous, repetitious or redundant, e.g.

سأراك فيما بعد *sa''araaka fima ba'd* See you later. . أنت حي ترزق. *inahu* أنه ميت *mayitun wa-anta hayun turzaq* He is dead and you alive.

## 7. Quality Assessment and Audience Reception

Only bilingual readers, listeners or critics can accomplish translating/interpreting quality assessment. To be objective, the assessment has to be based on certain criteria, the most obvious of which is the semantic/stylistic fidelity to the original text/message. Fidelity entails such parameters as accuracy, grammaticality, acceptability, idiomaticity, and naturalness among others. Interpreting, however, requires other non – linguistic criteria for assessment.

On the other hand, monolingual audience who justify the act of translating/interpreting judge it in terms of other parameters, none of which pertains to fidelity which explicitly necessitates full knowledge of the two languages involved. The monolingual TL receptors, i.e., readers, judge translation in terms of their own language: style, grammar and TT intelligibility. The oral message receptors, i.e., listeners judge the interpreting act according to not only the above mentioned, but to non – linguistic criteria, at the top of which comes the message comprehensibility, which cannot be gauged in either-or terms but graded along a spectrum ranging from fully comprehensible when the interpretation is clear and easy to understand to partially comprehensible and to totally incomprehensible. Besides, the audience rate the interpreting quality according to other criteria pertaining to smooth and fluent delivery, immediateness, pleasant voice, natural intonation and articulation, speech rate ( whether fast or slow ), self-composure, and idiolectal features such as the use of exaggerated fillers like *emmm, errr...*



## **8. Conclusion**

The present paper has highlighted the similarities and differences between translating and interpreting and has demonstrated that the aspects of divergence are more than those of convergence. This is reflected in the requirements needed, the constraints imposed and the strategies necessitated by each.

There are at least five requirements for translating competence vis-à-vis ten for interpreting. Besides, two constraints are common for both translating and interpreting, with three other constraints imposed on the latter. The constraints necessitate resorting to certain strategies for the interpreter in order to cope with such stressful situations. Eight strategies have been propounded: syntactic modification, segmenting and chunking, lining-up or queuing, calquing, approximation, borrowing and ellipsis.

The corollary is that interpreting is more complicated and demanding than translating, though both deal with the rendition from SL into TL. The assessment of the quality of translation and interpreting also diverge widely. Bilingual audience rate translation and interpreting quite differently from monolinguals. Fidelity, which is of paramount importance for assessing translation quality by bilinguals, is not the criterion by monolingual audience who rate interpreting in terms of other linguistic as well as non-linguistic criteria, as explicated in this study.

## References

1. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Ibid.
3. Nida, Eugene. A ( 1964 ). *Toward a Science of Translating*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
4. Nida, E.A. and Taber, Charles R. ( 1969 ). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
5. For more details, see: AS-SAFI, A. B. ( 2001 ). “ Lexicalization and Modalization of Prepositions in English–Arabic Translation”. *International Journal of Arabic – English Studies*. Vol. 2. Nos. 18-2.
6. Padilla, Pand Martin, A. (1992). “Similarities and Differences between Interpreting and Translation: Implications for Teaching”. Dollerup, Cay and Loddeggard, Ann. *Teaching Translation and Interpreting*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, P.196.
7. Jackendoff, Ray. ( 1972 ). *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. Pp. 400, p – in Nicholson, Nancy S, ( 1991 ). “*Linguistic Theory and Simultaneous Interpretation: Semantic and Pragmatic Considerations*”. *Babel*, Vol 37, No 3, P. 96.
8. El-Shiyab, R. and R. Hussien. ( 2000 ). “On the Use of Compensatory Strategies in Simultaneous Interpretation”. *META*: Vol XIV, No3, 2000. Montreal: La Press de l'Université de Montreal, pp. 548 – 557.

## Transliteration Table

<p>a    أ</p> <p>b    ب</p> <p>t    ت</p> <p>th    ث</p> <p>j    ج</p> <p><u>h</u>    ح</p> <p><u>kh</u>    خ</p> <p><u>d</u>    د</p> <p><u>th</u>    ذ</p> <p>r    ر</p> <p>z    ز</p> <p>s    س</p> <p><u>sh</u>    ش</p> <p><u>s</u>    ص</p> <p><u>dh</u>    ض</p> <p><u>t</u>    ط</p> <p><u>d</u>    ظ</p> <p>‘    ع</p>	<p>gh    غ</p> <p>f    ف</p> <p>q    ق</p> <p>k    ك</p> <p>l    ل</p> <p>m    م</p> <p>n    ن</p> <p>w    و</p> <p>y    ي</p> <p>Short Vowels</p> <p>u    <u>dhamma</u></p> <p>a    fat-ha</p> <p>i    kasra</p> <p>Long Vowels</p> <p>aa    الف</p> <p>oo    الواو</p> <p>ee    الياء</p> <p>ay    اي</p> <p>au    او</p>
---	---

### About the author

Professor A. B. As-Safi is a translation theorist and practitioner. He has written two books on translation: *Translation: Theory and Practice* (1974) and *Translation: Theories, Strategies and Basic Theoretical Issues* (2011). He has also translated into English: *Taha Hussein: The Call of the Curlew*, (published by E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1980), *Iraq: 30 Years of Progress* (published by Ministry of Information and Culture, 1998); and into Arabic: *Catford's A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1983). He has also published twenty-five papers in Belgium, Britain, Holland, Iraq, Jordan and Morocco. He has supervised more than thirty MA and ten PhD theses. He holds PhD in literary translation from Lancaster University, Britain. In addition to teaching and research, he has occupied several posts as Head of English Department at Basrah University, Iraq; and Translation Department at Al-Mustansiriyah University, Baghdad, Iraq; President of Iraqi Translators' Association; and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Al-Zaytoonah University, Jordan. He is currently lecturing on translation at postgraduate level at Petra University, Jordan.

Email: [abdulbaki30@yahoo.com](mailto:abdulbaki30@yahoo.com)

In *SKASE Journal of Translation and Interpretation* [online]. 2013, vol. 6, no. 1 [cit. 2013-03-07]. Available on web page <[http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTI07/pdf\\_doc/04.pdf](http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JTI07/pdf_doc/04.pdf)>. ISSN 1336-7811.