

Consecutive Interpretation Challenges

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Abstract

Consecutive interpreting entails a large number of almost concurrent cognitive, psychomotor and effective processes, which pose major challenges for the interpreter who has to deal with them simultaneously. The interpreter is constantly confronted with unexpected situations during his/her work which need to be dealt with at the prompt.

This paper focuses on some unexpected problems which might appear during consecutive interpreting, based on the authors' experience as official interpreters who have interpreted in several activities from English into Albanian or English –Romanian and vice -versa.

By taking the case study method, this paper will provide and analyze specific examples from Albanian situation, bringing into attention some unexpected challenges which may emerge during interpreting.

Finally, based on the authors' practical experience, the paper will try to give some solutions for overcoming these unexpected challenges along with skills and strategies employed by the interpreter in order to accomplish the task successfully.

Keywords

consecutive interpreting, challenges, unexpected problems, skills, strategies

1. Introduction

Consecutive interpreting entails a large number of almost concurrent cognitive, psychomotor and affective processes, all of which pose major challenges for the interpreter who has to deal with them simultaneously (Giles 2014). In spite of interpreters' preparation strategies, problems do arise in interpreting situations (see Gile 1989) because of processing capacity limitations, errors in processing capacity management, and gaps in the interpreters' knowledge base. Many of these problems can be said to be unavoidable, as shown by the fact that they are encountered regularly even by interpreters with a solid reputation and long professional experience. It is therefore crucial that interpreter training should be as effective as possible and that during their training period, future professional interpreters should develop a series of strategies or tactics that can be used to solve the problems encountered.

Gile (1995; 2009) describes a series of tactics and strategies interpreters apply when problems in the interpreting process arise. He establishes a distinction between the terms *tactics* and *strategies*. According to this author, strategies are

planned actions with specific objectives and tactics refer to online decisions and actions taken by the interpreter during the execution of the task to overcome the difficulties encountered. He restricts the use of these two terms to deliberate decisions and actions aimed at preventing or solving problems (Ribas M.2012:2)

Consecutive interpreting is widely used everywhere and one of the major problems is that interpreters are faced with a lot of unexpected problems which could not be anticipated and need to be solved at instant in order to face the challenge successfully.

Studies in Interpreting are still not as much as studies in Translation, and one thing which needs to be appreciated is that most of the research which is done in this field, results directly from the direct experience of the researchers as consecutive interpreters and imposing tactics and strategies they have employed in order to face the challenge successfully. According to Hurtado (2001: 276), despite their fundamental importance concerning the key role of operative knowledge in translation and interpreting, studies which examine translation and interpreting strategies are still in their infancy. Gile (2000: 81) similarly stresses that there are very few studies that describe strategic processes in interpreting.

Most of these strategies and tactics can be then used by the new interpreters and can serve as a guide to them for their future profession and be enriched by new ones that they can experience themselves. In this way more research can be offered to the respective field of studies.

Based on my experience as an interpreter in Albania for a long time, I want to discuss some of the problems which might arise to Albanian interpreters during their work. These unexpected problems which might be the same for interpreters in other countries as well will be provided with specific examples resulting from the occasions when I was hired to interpret on different events and activities happening in Albania.

2. Situation of interpreting in Albania

Interpreting is relatively new as a discipline in Albania. Although it has been growing extremely fast as a discipline after 1990s (after the fall of communist regime), we do not have a specific university in Albania which prepares professional interpreters only.

Some of our state Universities, especially the main University of Tirana offers specific Master and PhD programs to students of Faculty of Foreign Languages in *Translation Studies* and in the programmes they offer you can find a combination of Translation and Interpretation studies within the same programme or course. Translation studies are widely taught and learned by students at our university programmes, but as it was mentioned before different forms of interpretation are taught within these translation studies Master programmes incorporated within translation hours²⁸. Additionally, the lack of the proper

²⁸ The Faculty of Foreign Languages at University of Tirana, (the biggest and the most important university in Albania) offers Master of Science in Translation and Interpretation. If someone looks at the interpretation courses offered in this programme, he will see that

infrastructure (such as interpretation booths and labs) in most universities in Albania make it difficult for the university lecturers of Foreign Languages to teach interpretation, especially the simultaneous one.

However, there is a greed for interpretation service in Albania during the last 30 years with the change of the political system and opening of the country towards the world. This process of integration and democracy has required a lot of “self-made” interpreters to be employed.

Of course, each of the people employed in this process has attended his/her studies in Faculty of Foreign Languages, and attended post-graduate programmes in Translation Studies. But the thing which has influenced most in their formation as professional interpreters, is *practice* in activities where interpretation was needed.

With the fall of Communist regime the opening and participation of Albania to different international organizations and institutional bodies required a great number of interpreters to fill the need for different kinds of activities which were organized everywhere. So, the first choice would be the best students and professors who had studied foreign languages at university, especially English, French and Italian.

Adhering in so many international organisms for more than 27 years now, these “first” interpreters have turned into real specialists and they have become real professionals in their areas of expertise, so they can teach tactics and strategies to the young interpreters and contribute with their experience to interpretation research.

3. Challenges faced by Albanian interpreters

Which are some the specific problems Albanian consecutive interpreters experience? Some of the challenges described below might be the same which other interpreters in different countries may face. The ones listed below are some of the most acquainted problems by me during interpretation task. I have tried to list them according to their frequency because they seem to have happened several times.

3.1 Not knowing the subject of consecutive interpreting before

One of the main principles of interpreting, is that the interpreter should be fully aware of the subject and he should be equipped before with all necessary materials about the meeting or event which he/she is going to interpret, and ideally speaking to have beforehand all the speeches and presentations in order to get acquainted and familiarized with the general overview, terminology and specific terms used by the respective industry which required the interpretation service.

Paradoxically enough, the interpreters in Albania, (in most of the cases) are usually hired in the very last moment (1 day, before meeting). In my career there have been very rare the cases where the organizers have provided me with the materials and presentations some days before the meeting (maximum twice or three times!).

they are incorporated within a certain translation course. For more information on the courses offered see the references at the end of the

Organizers may call you a day before, or even an hour before the meeting is due to be held that they need you to interpret in an event!! Two years ago, when I was teaching at University, and it was 10.30 A.M, the event organizer of EU Information Office, which operates in the city I live, called me and she told me that she urgently needed me because the Belgian Ambassador in Albania was coming and she would hold a speech there, without letting me even ask about the subject of event!!

One tactic I employ such situations is that I insist that the organizers should send me at least the agenda of the meeting, so I can see the topics of presentations and I can search the web on my own, in order to get informed more about a certain project, company, or organization whose name I find on the agenda!! And this tactic has resulted successful for me, up to now (in most of the cases at least!!).

But this strategy is not always effective. I want mention here a very stressful situation which happened to me last year when a colleague from the Department of Justice at our university called me one evening. He told me that they needed me to go and interpret the following day in a conference room because the Chairman of one of European Courts would come in the city where I live and he was going to have a seminar with lawyers and prosecutors of the region. He told me it was going to be simultaneous interpreting. I insisted so much and asked him which court did that chairman belong to and which was the topic of the seminar? My colleague told me to take it easy and it might be the Chairman of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg and may be they could discuss about cases Albanian citizens have in this court.

I felt so stressed as he told me he didn't know the topic or did not have any materials about the meeting, but he repeated that I should not worry at all!! I asked him to put me in contact with any of the organizers, but he told me that it was the Chairman of Albanian Supreme Court that had asked him to find an interpreter in the region and of course he could not bother him with such kinds of questions as he was a very important person!!

I remember that I started searching in the internet and reading as much as I could about European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg and spent hours to familiarize with the judicial terms in both languages, as I have to admit, for me legal language is the most difficult to interpret just because of the very specific terminology it has either in source, or target language. I also printed some materials, so to make my job easier.

Then, when I went there before the meeting started I had the chance to meet one of the organizers, and when I asked her about the agenda and title of the seminar she told me that it was going to last for 5 hours (not half an hour as I was told before!!) and it would be *consecutive* and not *simultaneous* as I was told. So I had to sit next to the Chairman in the round table and to be in front of the Tv cameras as they were going to broadcast the event and in the end the journalists and audience would make questions to him.

Besides, she said that the Chairman who was coming did not belong to the European Court of Human Rights in *Strasbourg*, but he was a distinguished jurist

from the European Court of Justice in *Luxembourg*!! He was not going to discuss about Albanian cases in Strasbourg Court, but about organization and functioning of European Court of Justice, the changes it undertook after the treaty of Lisbon, preliminary decisions and other complaints or legal cases in this Court.

So, the very first *tactic* I should use was to “*calm down!*” as the meeting was going to start in 10 minutes and there some 60 very important representatives by the courts and prosecutions in Albania!! And so I did, and I continued my job.

It went well and there were no other unexpected challenges, but I just brought this example to show that people do not have a clue about interpreting service and they think that it is a very simple thing to be done by everyone who just knows a foreign language. These prejudices unfortunately exist in Albania and sometimes it is really hard to change people’s ideas about that.

3.2 Not familiar with the specific terminology of the audience (very technical interpretation)

In most of the cases where you are asked to interpret, the audience is really specialized in a certain field and they are used to using a specific terminology. This may pose difficulty to the interpreter in the sense that he/she is expected and *should* use the specific terms in the target language used by the specialist of the respective audience.

In other words, the audience expects that you are “*one of them*” and use the terminology they use every day in their industry. You may use a synonym for the target language word or term into your own language, and although the synonym is linguistically and pragmatically *correct* the audience reacts with a kind of disapproval and they seem ready to interfere and correct the interpreter in an instant, though this is neither ethical, nor right in my opinion. This case usually happens with the Albanian target language audience, and it has never happened, at least to me, with the source language speakers.

I remember once, when I had to interpret in a two-week training on “*Small boat operation*” organized by US Coast Guard and American Embassy with Albanian Marine and Delta Force officers in Vlora, Albania, when the coast guard presenter was describing different kinds of *lines* used for towing boats in the sea, each one of them bearing a specific name in Albanian. The general word for *line* in Albanian is “*litar*”, but marine officers and sailors use another colloquial word, “*cima*”, which is not included in the dictionary of Standard Albanian Language. For me it was the first time I have heard this word. I remembered that when I interpreted the word “*line*” with the standard word “*litar*”, the audience reaction was immediate and I could see their disapproval attitude, and they corrected me in chorus. “*cima*”!!

So, although you may be *linguistically* correct, you are not *pragmatically* correct, which may put you in embarrassment. Audience need industry specific words, so an interpreter should be aware of this, though it’s really difficult sometimes to pretend to know everything, above all the jargon and very technical terms used by a specific audience in their every day work.

3.3 Interpreting for very long hours (1 interpreter for the whole event which may last up to 6 hours!!)

This is also a very demanding and exhausting work. Theoretically and practically speaking interpreters should not work more than 3-4 hours, and even in this case they should switch with the other interpreter. It is compulsory that there should be *at least 2 interpreters* for an event. However, from my experience, I can say that in most of cases, I have been hired as the *only* interpreter for the whole event. I mean, for consecutive interpretation. I am not sure whether it happens the same in other countries as well, but it is quite common in my country.

I had to interpret in a bio-marine workshop on *fish recovery* in the Karaburun Peninsula, a peninsula in Albania, a year ago. It was a very specific workshop, where different types of fish and other sea creatures of the Mediterranean were being described and the audience was really educative and academic. It consisted in professors, researchers, representatives from the Ministry of Food of Republic of Albania, university lecturers, researchers etc. The presenters who had to deliver presentations and speeches were Europeans from different nationalities, representatives of International Research Associations and Organizations (Spanish, French, Italian), really famous in their research area and they had to share their experience with the Albanian respective researchers.

I was the *only* consecutive interpreter for the whole workshop which started at 9 A.M -6 P.M with two 15 minutes coffee-breaks and one hour lunch break in between. Of course they did not provide me with the presentations which were going to be delivered before with the justification that they were not ready yet and people prepare them just before the meeting, but they provided me with the agenda of the workshop a day before.

It was really demanding, because I had to speak all the time. When the presenters spoke in English I had to interpret for the audience in Albanian, and when the audience made questions, comments, and discussions I had to interpret for the foreign representatives. Practically speaking, it was absolutely exhausting! I have had three or more other similar experiences where I had to interpret for the whole event alone, for very long hours where sometimes just because of the interest and discussions the events go beyond the prescheduled time.

The reasons why organizers do such kind of thing in Albania, is that they *do not want to spend a lot of money in interpretation service*. So, they just spend a ridiculous amount of money for one interpreter and that's it!! Although they want the job to be done in the best way possible, they do not want to reward the interpreters for experiencing such a stressful and exhausting situation, which is against the principles of course.

3.4 Communicative versus word for word translation and audience interference

Nowadays, with English becoming an international language, you can hardly meet people who do not speak English. The majority of professionals, and almost all young people speak and understand English. These does not mean that

all of them are excellent English speakers, or their level of comprehension is excellent, but their level of understanding differs from individual to individual.

I am not sure whether such kind of thing happens even in other countries, but there is a tendency of the audience, or better 3 or 4 members of the audience, who happen to speak English better than the others and they are always ready to interfere in your interpreting. I mean, when you are doing consecutive interpreting and the speech you have just heard is a bit long and you want to summarise it to catch up with the speaker and time, intentionally you may skip unimportant words without losing thread of thought or essence of conversation. Above all, interpreters interpret ideas, not words and communicative interpretation is much better than word for word one!!

But, there are a lot of cases when a member of the audience may interfere and translate the word you have skipped, in such an insulting manner. Moreover, there are even rare cases when they might say: *"You didn't translate that word! What a shame!! It was quite easy."* There might even be gossiping when they whisper to the person sitting next to them that the interpreter did not know this word. You can always tell this by the reaction in their faces and the way they look at you.

This is crazy, in my opinion. The concentration of an interpreter is totally on the speaker, and the process of understanding something in a language and interpreting it in another one is totally a different thing!! It is one thing to listen and understand someone who speaks in a language, and a totally different one to decode the message in another language and above all to reformulate and deliver it in a real time. You have to understand, to encode the message in your brain and to decode, reformulate and deliver it in the target language. All this complex process should be done in an instant without causing pauses or lapses, otherwise interpretation is not done successfully.

3.5 Lack of concentration

Another very important element in interpreting, probably the most important one in my opinion, is the concentration. A lack of concentration on the speaker sometimes may be *fatal* for the interpreter because you lose the thread of thought and you create pauses in communication. I do think that a good memory and good concentration are the key elements of consecutive interpretation, apart from a very good command of source and target language. I know cases among colleagues, who tell me that they do not accept interpretation tasks just before they lack concentration and they cannot follow the speaker!!

Sometimes lack of concentration can be caused by external factors such as: too much noise from the audience, the interpreter not feeling well during the moment of interpreting, too fast speakers and other distractors. Of course, it is the interpreter's responsibility to "fill the gap" in these instances of lack of concentration by using his experience, knowledge on the topic discussed and familiarity with the subject being discussed. Otherwise, having so many people in front of you, who are expecting your turn to speak and your failure to do it appropriately may be quite embarrassing and may cause dissatisfaction on the event organizers who have hired you.

Some of the most common strategies for such kind of case for “filling the gap” are *generalizing* or *summarizing* what you have interpreted up to the moment, speaking fluently by using your common sense and trying to catch up with the speaker and continue your interpretation task. A good interpreter knows how to face challenges and climb obstacles which may quite unexpectedly emerge in front of him/her.

3.6 Extremely fast speakers

Another challenge which might be put up in front of you as an interpreter is the fact that you have to interpret for speakers who speak *extremely fast*. Although speakers know before that their speech is going to be interpreted, some of them do not care about it, or another reason might be that perhaps they cannot change their fast way of speaking. This might be challenging for the interpreter, especially if he/she is in a booth, and try so much to keep up with the speaker and deliver his ideas in the real time, although this may be quite hard.

But I think the situation is much more serious in consecutive interpreting when you have to face the audience and all the participants in front of you, despite having to remember the big amount of information the speaker said in a very short period of time speaking. One of the strategies to help the interpreter in such a case is *note-taking* and you must be really skillful in doing such kind of thing because sometimes you may not understand your own notes especially if they are numbers or figures. Notetaking might be of great help if you are sitting next to the speaker in a table, and you have the possibility to write down.

Unfortunately this is not my case. I remember that on one occasion I had to interpret for the Ambassador of Netherlands in Albania in one international forum about creative cities and economy, who is probably the fastest speaker I have ever had to interpret up to the present. She stood in front of the audience, and I was standing next to her. There was not any table or something where I could keep notes, as we were standing. She greeted the audience and then talked about creative economy back in her country, and her speed of delivery was so fast, that I had to totally to concentrate on her without knowing what was happening around...My head was spinning and it was such a demanding task, that I cannot manage to explain properly in words. Fortunately, it went very well, and I was so happy when she finished speaking, that it seemed to me I had done an extraordinary thing interpreting for this extremely fast speaker, and above all, Ambassador.

Another challenge which might add to fast speakers is (in most of the cases) their English *accent*. This is one challenge that all the interpreters face no matter which nationality they belong to. Most people we have to interpret might not be native speakers, and this may do the task of interpreting either easier or more difficult in a lot of cases. No matter how much foreign language speakers try to speak English with either British or American accent, the influence of their mother tongue accent is there and it brings problems in interpreting sometimes.

I can mention here the case when I had to interpret for an Italian biologist, who did not speak English very well, although she is a prominent figure in her field

of research. She spoke half English, half Italian and I can say my good knowledge of Italian helped a lot and interpretation task went very well.

Another case was when I had to interpret for an Austrian expert in tourism, development and sustainability, when time and again his very strong German accent influenced on his English and put me in difficult position to properly understand what he was saying. But by concentrating hard, I managed to deal with the situation successfully.

But, the most difficult situation was the case of a French researcher when he was delivering the results of a French study on different kind of speeches living in the Mediterranean sea and providing examples by fish farms they create on France. He talked about several kinds of fish, which names were in French (not Latin). He told me he didn't know their respective names in English, but I had to interpret them in Albanian for the audience and in English for a part of audience who belonged to different nationalities!! This was really challenging and embarrassing for me, because I did not know the specific names of 35 different types of fish neither in Albanian, nor in English, as I wasn't a specialist of the field!!

The strategy I used for interpreting this situation, after we agreed with the presenter was by showing images to the audience of the different types of fish in a power point slide and summarizing in both languages that this was a table which represented different types of fish living in Mediterranean and each of the specialist from the heterogeneous audience could perfectly understand what the types of fish were just by image and they could match their name according to the language they spoke. Sometimes, just by using common sense, you can perfectly handle unexpected problems which may come up during the process.

4. Conclusions

The above mentioned were some specific real challenges which have been posed to the interpreter in different real situations. Although the process of interpreting might seem hard and might ask for several strategies and tactics which need to be known and employed in different situations, I have to emphasise that each case is different from the other. The strategies which might work on one occasion, might not work in the other.

Finally, the interpreter needs to be alert and to try his/her best every time otherwise his/her task might not results successful. By employing the right strategies and tactics, knowledge, background and above his/her common sense at prompt he/she can solve the situation in the best way possible.

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