According to an anecdote that once made the rounds among United Nations (UN) interpreters, a young delegate attending his first UN General Assembly, upon hearing simultaneous interpreting in six languages for the first time, approached a conference officer and asked, “This translation system is wonderful, where can I buy one?” While the anecdote may be apocryphal, it pointedly raises a persistent paradox: simultaneous interpreting is as widely misunderstood as it is widely used.

Multilingual Communication in Real Time

The world relies upon simultaneous interpreting for international communication and decision-making. Without it, multilingual debates and negotiations, already hampered by many political and procedural hurdles, would slow to a crawl due to the need for everything to be repeated sequentially in all of the speakers’ various languages, as in the days of the League of Nations. Since most listeners would understand only one of several versions they would have to listen to, the stultifying effect on communication and dialogue is hard to overstate.¹ For an organization like the European Union, with 23 official languages, multilingual debate in real time would be impossible.

Yet, despite its importance, many still do not understand the purpose of simultaneous interpreting and readily confuse or compare it with translation. (This is understandable given the fact that some of what a translator does involves “interpreting” the text, and some of what an interpreter does involves “translating” the speech.) There is even speculation that machine translation combined with voice recognition technology may someday lead to a form of machine interpretation.² Of course, while machine translation is gradually learning to do it a little better,³ the human brain, the most powerful of all computers, does it much better and has been doing so for some 57 years, ever since simultaneous interpreting was introduced at the Nuremberg trials.

However, the confusion about “translation” and “interpreting”
Translatability and Untranslatability in Simultaneous Interpreting (Or Overcoming the Mot Juste Syndrome) Continued

goes beyond the everyday misuse of the two terms or the assumption that it is a mechanical act that can be replicated just as efficiently by computers. The real confusion stems from not appreciating that writing/reading and speaking/listening are two different ways of understanding, encoding, decoding, and re-encoding ideas. One method works with visual/graphic symbols that are meant to be fixed or permanent, and the other method works with aural symbols—the fleeting sounds of the human voice—which convey a vastly greater range of meaning, especially emotional meaning, and are constantly evolving. The fundamentally different nature of these two forms of symbolic communication can be glimpsed when one considers, for example, why it is that a libretto can be translated but an opera is almost never performed in translation.4 Because written words originate as graphic representations of spoken words, we tend to focus on their semantic resemblance rather than on the differences between the pen and the voice as a medium of communication.

For example, word choice, a key concern in written composition, takes on different outlines when interpreting. Interpreting is not so much a composition as an improvisational performance. As with any other art, performers of simultaneous interpreting do not always do it perfectly, but are nonetheless always expected to perform. As aptly put by Douglas Schuler, one of the co-authors of Liberating Voices: A Pattern Language for Communication Revolution (MIT Press), “Totally accurate translation is impossible but imperfect translation is ubiquitous—and essential.”5 Still, if it existed, would “totally accurate” translation or interpreting be good translation or interpreting? Does an interpreter best convey a speaker’s meaning and intent by striving to reflect each and every semantic nuance with “total accuracy?” The problem is not that simple. Schuler goes on to offer an equally apt description of what good translation is and how it is shaped by context:

“Moreover, the context of the words in the sentence, the sentence in the paragraph, etc., that is being translated, all within the context of the inspiration and intent and audience are all relevant when translating….Translation, therefore, is not a mechanical act, but a skilled and empathetic re-writing or re-performing of a text or utterance or intention in which an understanding of the two cultures being bridged is essential.”

Because the re-performing of the message requires empathy, it can only be done by another human being. Empathy helps the interpreter both to understand the speaker’s ideas and to reflect faithfully the speaker’s intent (as does contact with the speaker before the speech).6 How that empathy comes into play is an intuitive process that is difficult to describe or explain, but which can be learned through practice, like acting or music.7

Perhaps the best way to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the simultaneous interpreter’s task is through a closer look at the dynamic structure of the encoding process that takes place during every interpreted encounter. This is also a good way to explain why translation and interpreting require different tactics to render meaning. As Schuler states, such a performance is anything but mechanical.

Performance Dimensions

A concise definition of good interpreting and translation that is often cited, for example, in the codes of professional conduct of court interpreters, states that interpreters and translators should “faithfully and accurately reproduce in the target language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message [emphasis mine].”8 Significantly, this definition does not say “the nearest equivalent word.” “Closest” refers to closeness of meaning, not necessarily of words. This is the first of three important considerations regarding the performance dimensions of translation and interpreting, outlined below.

1. One must be careful to distinguish between meaning and words. Words are one means among many by which speakers and writers express meaning. Should a simultaneous interpreter attempt to track the wording of the original message? It can sometimes be done, but the effort it demands of a simultaneous interpreter can lead to omitting or distorting other parts of the message, especially with complex syntax or when a speaker’s intent differs from his or her literal meaning (as often happens in diplomatic discourse), or when the connotations may be more important than the denotation (as sometimes happens in irony, allusions, or humor). As a measure of completeness, a word count can be a rough indicator of whether the full text of a book has been translated from the source language into the target language, but it does not tell us whether a speaker’s message has reached its intended audience.

2. One must bear in mind the time constraints under which the communication takes place. Martin
Luther took pride in the fact that, when translating the Bible, he often spent up to four weeks researching a single word. Such patience and intellectual discipline is commendable in a translator. But to a simultaneous interpreter with only seconds in which to produce an acceptable equivalent, obsessively searching for the most suitable word is a case of “the best is the enemy of the good.” Many novice interpreters fall victim to the *mot juste* syndrome (the need to find exactly the right word or expression), but even an experienced interpreter will sometimes falter in mid-sentence trying to retrieve the perfect target language word from memory and still draw a blank. Simultaneous interpreting is expected to begin and end at the same time as the original speech so that participants at the meeting can complete their business and adjourn. In simultaneous interpreting, time is of the essence, and the interpreter has to perform his or her task within the time limits dictated by the speaker and the setting.

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Performance Dimensions

A linguist’s performance is anything but mechanical. Here are three important considerations interpreters and translators must keep in mind as they reproduce meaning in the target language.

1. One must be careful to distinguish between meaning and words.

2. One must bear in mind the time constraints under which the communication takes place.

3. One should remember how the content of the communication was created.

Interpreting is not so much a composition as an improvisational performance.

3. One should remember how the content of the communication was created. Except in extemporaneous remarks, speakers generally prepare their speeches beforehand, memorize them or at least think them through, or speak from written notes. Therefore, the structure and style of the oral material the interpreter hears may bear a deceptive resemblance to writing. But readers are not generally expected to absorb intelligently what they read at rates of up to 170 words per minute, while interpreters nowadays must sometimes keep up with speakers who deliver their speeches at that rate. A word or expression which might force a reader to pause momentarily to reflect upon the meaning cannot be processed in that way by the interpreter. Thumbing through a dictionary is out of the question. Hence the importance to an interpreter of a general education broad enough at least to recognize any source language utterance and/or to derive the meaning from the context. The “speeches” with which interpreters work are often writings read aloud, which means they are more complex and densely packed with meaning than spontaneous speech.

What is Translatable?

Working with material whose translatability is shaped by the performance dimensions just mentioned, how much semantic content should a competent simultaneous interpreter be expected to render from the source to the target language? Opinions vary.
According to one thorough study, conveying meaning from source to target accounts for about 60% of the work done by parliamentary interpreters. In some contexts, a “goal” of 90% completeness is used. In some simultaneous interpreting examinations a passing performance is “getting 70% of the meaning across.” But what if the 30% that was lost in an interpreter’s “passing performance” contained some of the speaker’s main points (for example, because they came at the end and the interpreter fell behind while struggling with details)? That question suggests how arbitrary quantitative criteria can be and prompts the following two propositions about simultaneous interpreting techniques:

1. An interpreter should exercise sound editorial judgment in deciding what must be fully conveyed and what can be safely edited while keeping pace with the speaker and respecting the original meaning and intent; and

2. A simultaneous interpreter should strive to convey 100% of the speaker’s meaning by focusing on the main ideas, even if it requires systematically condensing verbiage and abridging or deleting details that are obvious, redundant, or superfluous.

We know that there is often no exact one-to-one correspondence between words and structures in different languages. This alone should suffice to immunize interpreters against the mental blocks induced by the mot juste syndrome, since it shows that searching for the equivalent is often futile. Whatever target language equivalent is used, it will probably not correspond completely to the source language item. The goal of complete accuracy in diction is often illusory. A more relevant point is that even within the confines of one language, we commonly call things by more than one name or say things in different ways, depending on context and usage. Also, there are often two or more interchangeable ways of saying something (e.g., “How are you?” and “How are you doing?”; “onerous” and “burdensome”). An interpreter in the habit of using a single target language equivalent is applying to the complex task of multilingual communication a constraint not usually applied to the simpler task of monolingual speech. As a result, the interpreter will be hard-pressed if he or she forgets that one target language equivalent.

**Contexts and Choices**

Consequently, being mindful that memory is fallible, it is wise to start from the assumption that for any given source language item there may be several possible equivalents in the target language, depending on the context. This means the interpreter will usually have choices. Having choices is an advantage, which is why interpreter training should include practice on “widening the options.” The fact that context largely determines meaning has many implications for the interpreter’s choices. Here are some examples.

1. The context may narrow the meaning of the source language item, making it harder to retrieve an opposite target language equivalent from memory. In the following example, the context makes it necessary to use two target language verbs for one source language verb:

   “A través de una acción integral basada en una estrategia de acompañamiento social y educativo personalizado, los menores aprenden castellano, practican actividades de ocio y tiempo libre, habilidades sociales tales como resolución de conflictos, comunicación y pensamiento crítico...”

   ["Through a comprehensive action strategy based on social support and personalized education, children learn Castilian, engage in recreation and leisure activities, and practice social skills such as conflict resolution, communication and critical thinking..."]

   Because the verb “practice” does not work with the object “recreation and leisure” in this context, it is necessary to use two verbs in English, although only one verb is used in Spanish.

2. The context may make the meaning more generic, making it possible to use any of several roughly synonymous target language items, thus making the task easier. For example: “The Mayor’s office was flooded/deluged/inundated with complaints.”

   ["A través de una acción integral basada en una estrategia de acompañamiento social y educativo personalizado, los menores aprenden castellano, practican actividades de ocio y tiempo libre, habilidades sociales tales como resolución de conflictos, comunicación y pensamiento crítico..."]
3. The context may point to using a standard word or phrase, such as a common idiom or cliché. For example: arremangarse la camisa ("to roll up one’s sleeves").

4. The context may contain structures that rule out using some of the possible synonyms or equivalents, for example, because they will not fit grammatically. For instance, in the following enumeration composed of verbs, it would be awkward to include the last item as a noun, even though it is the best interpretation of capital de inversión:

Our company plans to:
• Expand market share;
• Streamline management processes;
• Capital investment.

5. The general context (character of the audience, identity of the speaker, nature of the subject, etc.) may render some of the possible options inappropriate or “taboo,” as in the case of politically correct speech, gender-neutral language, or in a speech to a specific age group. For example, the following sentence from a discussion of EU affairs inadvertently uses a comical racial stereotype by translating literally a French expression used in reference to English-speakers: “An internal document...shows that 11 out of the 26 spokespersons who have already been designated to the incoming European Commission are Anglo-Saxon. Of these, seven are English and four are Irish.”

Dealing with Untranslatability
Within any of these contexts, and others, an interpreter may encounter source language items that present various forms of “untranslatability,” each of which may call for a different approach. Dealing with seemingly untranslatable utterances requires one to bear in mind that the same idea or emotion may find expression in different ways from one culture to another. It involves asking, for example, whether an utterance is one of the following:

• The expression of an emotion: For example, the Portuguese word saudade is roughly translatable as “longing, yearning, nostalgia.” Rather than an awkward three-word paraphrase, the best solution, if the context allows, may be for the interpreter to express the emotion associated with saudade in his or her voice.

• An abstraction: What is referred to in one language using abstract nouns may be referred to in another language using concrete nouns (e.g., atención a la niñez y adolescencia = “care of children and adolescents”). Some source language abstract nouns may have several more specific target language equivalents. For example, normas in Spanish usually corresponds to laws, rules, guidelines, or standards in English. It is best to use the specific equivalent meant by the speaker, rather than to generalize the term by interpreting the word as “norms.”

• The title of a person: Titles and honorific words reflect social status and their usage is a matter of custom, but they are not used in all languages. For example, it is customary in Mexico to refer to all teachers and master craftsmen as maestro or maestra, but in English no such honorific title is used. Similarly, the title maître is used in French when addressing or referring to lawyers and notaries, but in English no similar title is used. The correct English equivalent of these titles is the less deferential “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” or “Ms.” (An
interpreter can preserve the missing nuance by giving a note of deference to his or her voice.) Governmental, academic, diplomatic, and military titles pose similar problems, particularly for an interpreter, since the person being addressed or referred to is often present in the audience.

- **The name of a cultural institution:** For example, the Scandinavian word *ombudsmann*, having no satisfactory English equivalent that conveys the specific features of the institution, has simply been assimilated verbatim into English and other languages. To an audience unfamiliar with the institution, a paraphrase such as “community mediator” might be appropriate.

- **A technical term:** Technical terms acquire equivalents in different languages through coinage and convention. Pending the adoption of a target language equivalent, the original source language term is often used for a period of time. For instance, the English term “software” was used in French for years before the French term *logiciel* was coined and introduced. For this reason, interpreters need to be aware of recent technical coinages.

- **A figure of speech, such as a metaphor:** For an interpreter, it is just as important to identify an utterance as a figure of speech as it is to understand what it means. Otherwise, the interpreter may commit the misleading (and sometimes ludicrous) mistake of interpreting figurative language literally, thus losing the underlying message. For example, in a discussion among doctors or emergency medical technicians, it would be important for an interpreter to recognize the figure of speech *poner el dedo en la llaga* as a common metaphor (roughly equivalent to “putting salt in the wound,” meaning “to make things worse”). If the interpreter fails to recognize this phrase as a metaphor, he or she might otherwise take it literally and interpret it as “putting a finger into the wound.”

    When dealing with these types of utterances an interpreter often has to ask questions like:

- **Should I look for a different part of speech?** For example, many ideas expressed in Spanish with a noun are more normally expressed in English with a verb: “*La mejora de nuestro sistema educativo requiere mayores esfuerzos.*” (translated as “We should try harder to improve our educational system.”)

- **Is there anything in the target language culture that is thought of or talked about in a comparable way?** For example, the English stereotype “yuppie” is untranslatable because it is a coinage based on an English acronym for “young urban professional,” but in most contexts the corresponding French stereotype *jeune cadre dynamique* would convey the correct image and the right degree of irony.

- **Does the context or the sub-text make clear the implications or connotations?** For example, there is no good English equivalent for the Spanish word *convivencia* other than “coexistence,” a word tainted by cold-war political connotations. But in the context of a discussion among sociologists about family social services, a reference to *mejorar la convivencia familiar* (translated as “improving family coexistence”) would not mislead or confuse anyone.

### A Matter of Practice and Experience

Dealing at high speed with a range of items that both present challenges when interpreting and are shaped by context requires not only a high degree of language proficiency and cultural competency, but also versatile thinking, analytical judgment, and rhetorical aptitude—a combination of skills that is difficult to master. Relying on a “bilingual glossary” style of interpreting is not conducive to developing that set of skills. It is only through practice and experience that the simultaneous interpreter develops a repertory of solutions that can be brought to bear immediately as problems arise. Examining the fundamentals involved in the interpreter’s art, it becomes clear why interpreting is not synonymous with translating. It is also easier to understand why computers still have a long way to go in their efforts to catch up to their human counterparts.

### Notes

1. Besides communication, interpreting supports specialization by enabling experts and representatives to be chosen based on their subject-matter expertise rather than their knowledge of a particular language. This is an issue addressed by Graham Fraser, Canada’s commissioner of official languages, in his article, “Our High Court Should be Bilingual,” posted April 23, 2010 by the editor of the National Post, http://network.nationalpost.com/NP/blogs/full comment/archive/2010/04/23/gra
ham-fraser-our-high-court-should-be-bilingual.aspx.


7. Much can be learned from such contacts, not only about a speaker’s message but also about how he or she speaks (e.g., with an accent, in a dialect, in jargon, etc.). Judicial interpreters, unfortunately, may be precluded from such instructive contacts by rules regarding impartiality. See, for example, Romani vs. State. Court of Appeals of Georgia, decision of April 23, 2010: “…the trial court dismissed the witness’s interpreter after observing that the interpreter had watched the entire trial, including jury selection and the presentation of the state’s case the previous day, and was speaking to Romani during the trial in a way that made the trial court doubt the interpreter’s impartiality,” www.leagle.com/unsecure/page.htm?shortname=ingaco20100423159.

8. For an interesting and insightful personal account of how this intuitive process comes into play, see: Magalhães, Ewandro. “How Do You Do That?” Translated from the original Portuguese by Barry S. Olsen. The ATA Chronicle (April 2010), 12. See also related observations in: Setton, Robin. Training Conference Interpreters (Conference Interpreters Asia Pacific), www.ciap.net/webpages/news06.html.


12. The interpreter’s grasp of the source language message depends on short-term memory, but his or her target language rendition also draws on long-term memory, that is, knowledge of the vocabulary and culture of the source and target languages.


15. In this regard, see: Mikkelson, Holly. “‘Verbatim Interpretation’ Revisited.” Proteus (National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, Spring 2010, Volume XIX, No. 1).


18. For example, see: Clegg, Alicia. “A Matter of Interpretation.” Financial Times (February 1, 2010). “Culture plays a huge part in the success or failure of interpretation, because the cultural assumptions that come bundled with words may literally not translate. Ms. Olivier was sometimes told that a task would be muzukashii. Her interpreter translated this as ‘difficult,’ which Ms. Olivier took to mean tough but doable. Only when her team repeatedly missed deadlines did she begin to understand that muzukashii is a cultural euphemism for saying ‘It is impossible and we cannot do it.’”