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Interpreting Eloquence: When Words Matter as Much as Ideas

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During the 2007 Auckland Writers' Festival, I had the privilege to interpret for Andrei Makine, the celebrated French writer of Russian origin, who had been invited to participate in two events, a general discussion with the public and, with two other writers, a panel discussion entitled *The Art of Translation*. Apart from the assignment itself, the particular interest I found in this task was that I had to interpret the words of a writer while he was being asked to reflect upon his work and the processes of creation, writing and translation. The purpose of this paper is to describe the insights I gained during this very practical interpreting experience. In particular, I wish to discuss the existence of a possible new facet in interpreting.

Makine is unique on the french literary scene, having won two major french literary prizes – the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Medicis – in the same year (1995) with the same novel, *Le Testament français*, despite the fact that french is his second language . He is a unique character too: his style, his personality, a tendency to avoid answering the questions asked, and sometimes a wish to travel with his audience in the unknown territory of creativity, are all elements – as one immediately realises on meeting him – that will render the task of the interpreter more complex, but also more exciting, than anticipated.

The work I had to perform on these two occasions revealed a new facet of the complex work of the interpreter, for I could not rely on the interpreting techniques I usually use. Reading my notes afterwards and reflecting on this special assignment, I came to the conclusion that interpreting for a writer – would it be true for any artist? – is different from the usual kind of work an interpreter does, as the work of a literary translator is different from the work of a technical or legal translator.

To discuss the possible existence of a new facet of the work of interpreters, it is useful to focus first on some aspects of literary translation and the role of literary translators. Translation means rewriting a text in another language with the aim of transferring its essence and function. The semantic transfer, which often goes beyond words and grammar, and the necessary cultural adaptation, results in a new text, which must be as stylistically faithful as possible to the original, but is independent of it. As Makine mentioned during the panel discussion, in relation to the concepts of loss and fidelity in translation, a translation is a limit, a threshold which generates a new text compatible with the target culture. A translation is thus an act of communication

in which meaning is both lost and generated. The act of translation is an act of re-creation.

It is often pointed out that the paradox of a translation is that it provides a new vision and can erase the difference, the particularity, of the original text and can itself be seen as being original. A different language entails a different vision of life. This is why I believe that literary translators bring a new and different vision to a text, a new identity among many possible others, and which depends of course on the sensibility and background of the translator. Literary translators know that a literary work can be translated, and re-translated many times, for the same reason that a play can be staged differently an infinite number of times: because there is no single and ultimate truth of the text.

But who and what are literary translators? Are they merely, as some have claimed, frustrated writers with expertise in language and using someone else's text to satisfy their own creative urges? Or would it be more appropriate to say that literary translators are talented creative writers, who are able to capture the soul and the life spirit of an author, to rewrite the source text making its stylistic and semantic transfer possible and to create a new literary text that crosses borders and time, and bridges different worlds creatively but realistically? Whatever the answer, it is indisputable that to meet the challenge of literary translation, and find a way to take the original text across borders, translators need more than linguistic skills: they also need literary skills, they need to be practised readers. As Gayatri Spivak has argued, translation is "the most intimate act of reading".¹ Above all, translators need to be creative, for the ability to play the role of go-between requires creativity.

Such a view of the role of the translator is generally limited to the translator of the written word. However, it is relevant to ask the same questions in relation to translators of the spoken word: who and what are they? What does their task consist of and how different is this task from that of the translator of a written work? Very often, during diplomatic interpreting or conference interpreting assignments, for example, interpreters appear to be merely the voice of a speaker and seem not to have any responsibility for the content of what is said, relayed and conveyed. They don't even seem to exist as entities; they are figures either hidden behind the tinted glass of a booth or do their best to become a kind of "Invisible Man/Woman". Until recently, most people would see interpreters merely as fascinating skilled parrots, able to rephrase what has just been said in another language. Because of the simultaneity (or quasi-simultaneity) of the translation, the task seems to be rather literal, a word for word exercise.

However, work done in recent years by Translation Studies scholars and by interpreters themselves has helped to change or to clarify this image. I believe that it is well understood today that the interpreter, the translator of the spoken word, must be a creative go-between too, able to create a new "text" just like the translator of the written word. The interpreter is a "bridge" whose act of translation from one world to another, one language to another, in a very limited period of time, is a complex act which requires faithfulness not

¹ Gayatri Spivak, "The Politics of Translation" in L.Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 397-416 (p. 398).

only to the speaker but also to the target audience. More than anything else, an interpretation is an act of communication, an interpreter “a communication tool”. And of course some adjustments, some adaptations, have to be made for the initial message to be properly conveyed into the other culture and language, for precisely the same reasons that compel the translator of the written word to adapt the original text to the target culture.

An interpretation can be either simultaneous or consecutive. In the case of consecutive interpreting, the interpretation can be in a short consecutive mode – short phrases or sentences will be interpreted directly – or in the “classic” consecutive mode, where the interpreter has to take notes and interpret from them when the speaker pauses. Note-taking techniques are taught to interpreters very early in their training, because they will need this tool from very early on. Since the flow of words when spoken is faster than when written, interpreters have to find a way to write down what is said. Even if each interpreter develops his/her own note-taking technique, principles exist and have been modelled. It is often said that oral language facilitates the instant comprehension of an idea and that its evanescence induces the interpreter to retain only meaning and to forget the words themselves. Indeed, the idea rather than the words is what the interpreter has to capture when interpreting. As early as 1956, Jean-François Rozan developed a note-taking technique which has since been taught in many interpreting schools and programs.² Rozan believed that the interpreter must be free of the often misleading constraints that words represent. It is through the analysis and notation of the ideas that the interpreter will avoid mistakes and a laboured delivery. Generations of interpreters worldwide have been trained to respect the “seven principles” Rozan established to guide the interpreter in his note-taking. According to Rozan, the elements the interpreter must focus on while writing down what is being said are as follows:

- 1 Ideas, not words
- 2 Rules of abbreviation
- 3 Links
- 4 Negations
- 5 Adding emphasis
- 6 Verticality
- 7 Shift

These principles have been elaborated on by Danica Seleskovitch,³ who has proposed ten principles or commandments, and recommended a focus on:

- 1 Ideas
- 2 Links, relations of ideas one to another
- 3 Transcodable terms
- 4 Numbers
- 5 Proper names

² Jean-François Rozan, *La Prise de notes dans l'interprétation consécutive* (Geneva: Librairie de l'Université, 1956), trans. A. Gillies, as *Note-taking in Consecutive Interpreting* (Cracow: Tertium, 2003).

³ Danica Seleskovitch, *Langage, langues et mémoire. Etude de la prise de notes en interprétation consécutive* (Paris: Minard, Lettres modernes, 1975).

- 6 Technical terms
- 7 Lists
- 8 First sentence of each new idea
- 9 Last sentence
- 10 Striking usage (a word or expression that stands out)

These principles, taught regularly from the very beginning of training, are designed to ensure that the interpreter is able to capture the meaning of the message and to redeliver it without too many alterations, even if the words uttered by the speaker are not all relayed.

Seleskovitch's "théorie du sens" has also helped interpreters to conceptualise what they are doing, in terms of cognitive process, when on assignments. A central tenet of the theory is the notion of "déverbalisation", i.e. the ability of the translator to perceive the meaning of a text in its context and to convey its underlying message. As interpreters, we do not merely decode and transcode speech, we deliver ideas, we convey the message(s) of what is said through another language, another linguistic vehicle. This view implies that between the original words and their expression in the target language a non-verbal phase exists, in which the translator "interprets" the text before reformulating it. The interpreter discards the form of the source text (words, structure) and is free to concentrate on analysing its meaning and conceiving strategies for reformulating the message into the target language.

A consensus seems to exist on what the interpretative chain is, as far as the cognitive process for consecutive interpreting is concerned. It appears that every act of interpretation could be deconstructed as follows:

- perception of the message;
- comprehension of what is said (identification of words, meaning of the words in the sentence, meaning in the context);
- deverbalisation (summary of the meaning/interpretation) and notetaking (this phase includes the "immediate and deliberate discarding of the wording and retention of the mental representation of the message";⁴
- reformulation (creation);
- rephrasing/reexpression (free and natural).

Or, as Daniel Gile has modelled it,⁵ the chain could also be represented as a combination of "efforts", in two distinct phases. During the listening phase, we have:

- a Listening Effort
- a Production Effort (producing notes, not a target-language version of the speech);
- a short-term Memory Effort (storing information just received until it is noted for that part of the information taken down as notes).

During the reformulation phase, Gile distinguishes:

⁴ Danica Seleskovitch, *Interpreting for International Conferences* (Washington, D.C: Pen and Booth, 1978).

⁵ Daniel Gile, *Basic Concepts and Models for Translator and Interpreter Training* (Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995).

- a Note-Reading Effort;
- a long-term Memory Effort (for retrieving information stored in long-term memory and reconstructing the content of the speech);
- a Production Effort, for producing the target-language speech.

Being aware of these different cognitive sequences and knowing how to apply all these principles doesn't guarantee that the interpretation will be perfect, but it generally ensures that the interpreter will not miss much of what must be relayed. Complemented by good preparation for the assignment thanks to the documents sent to them and the research they have carried out, interpreters working along these lines are well armed to face the challenges of interpretation on D-day.

During the Writers' festival sessions, I had to interpret and translate, consecutively, the words and views of a world-famous author just as he was expressing them. And because of the particular nature of this task, because working for a writer is not the same as working for a politician or a scientist, I wonder today if I really did exactly the same work as usual. I prepared for the assignment as thoroughly as I could. I was provided with a lot of information about Makine. I was sent the questions which would be asked and the themes which would be talked about. I read many interviews with Makine from which I gained the clear impression that he is someone who does not want or like people to be able to anticipate his responses. On this occasion, contrary to the majority of the assignments I had previously undertaken, I did not have what I needed the most: the (intended) words of the speaker, his (possible) answers to the questions, and his views on the subjects he would have to deal with. And when I met him for the first time, and asked him after a while if we could read through the questions and prepare the events, he simply rejected the idea, albeit in a very friendly manner, explaining that he loved improvisation, and that he would not know until the precise moment of the question what he would answer. Too many elements – the place, the public, the atmosphere – would influence his reflections! It thus became clear that this assignment would not be like any other and that I would have to wait until the very last moment to know what I would have to interpret. During the four days I spent in his company, Makine was unfailingly pleasant, attentive and available. He simply did not feel like preparing the interviews.

When interpretation is "classic" consecutive interpretation, the translation is obviously made from an oral source and is delivered orally. However, as mentioned above, it goes through a written – usually codified – message. It is generally the result of a necessary deverbilisation of the text, so as to capture the intended meaning of the original sentence. Makine has little knowledge of English, but during the first event, within ten minutes, he realised that I was not translating *exactly* what he had just said. He realised I was translating the idea, not the words; and words are of the highest importance for a writer! He wanted me to interpret, or to try to interpret, all his words, and he also wanted the audience to be informed about this demand! Consequently, I realised that I could not simply try to codify his words and transmit only the message, the idea: I had to write more extensively and be more literal. So, not only did I try to deliver the meaning of his message, but I also tried to translate the words, almost all the words, and to convey to the audience Makine's very distinctive spirit, soul and style.

The task was unusual and different. Certainly less mechanical. I produced more than a verbal translation, more than an interpretation. I soon realised that I was more concerned than usual with the audience's understanding of and reaction to what was being said. Makine speaks as creatively as he writes, and I was wondering if the "epiphanies" he mentioned, the "aporias" he talked about, the poetic tone, images and style he deployed – his eloquence – were all understood and felt as they should be. And I did not want the audience to miss any of the particularities of what this artist was saying (rather cryptically at times) about the process of creation and writing, or about his feelings of loss and fulfilment regarding the act of translating, or even to miss his tendency to create a progressive effect when addressing important questions.

At some stage in the conversation, Makine was asked about the so-called "loss" of something in translation. To give his opinion on this familiar issue, he elaborated a long and progressive explanation, saying that in translation many things can be lost but many things are gained too; and his explanation reached a climax after a few minutes when he declared with lots of effect and style that "the loss is not such an issue because above all translation is an adventure". In this precise example, simply relaying the idea that "translation is an adventure", without communicating the fact that the writer was performing, very eloquently, and without rendering his conclusion as the climax of a stylistically elaborated answer in which nearly every word was important, would have missed the point. On hearing the applause from the public after that particular long segment, I understood that my approach was right.

Like many artists, Makine is a performer, and you can feel when listening to him that he likes performing. He also wanted to be funny and to amuse the audience. This also had to be translated. All translators know that the translation of humour is a very difficult and dangerous exercise. But in order to keep the spirit of Makine's words, and also to transmit his desire to be funny and entertain the public, the mere translation of ideas would not have worked. Everything he said, with an emphasis on certain words, had to be relayed.

As I wrote nearly the whole of what Makine was saying, I ended up with quite long and dense literary passages to translate. It was as if I was performing a sight translation: the instant verbal translation of a written text. More precisely in this case, I was producing a *literary* sight translation. This was rather unusual too. Following the principle that the interpreter should capture only the idea, relay the gist of what is being said, I was doing a very bad job. But if one admits that it was ethically, linguistically and artistically important to relay the exact style and spirit of Makine's words, then my unusually detailed notes – where nearly every word had its importance – were justified.

Simultaneous interpretation would surely be a better option when interpreters have to work on such assignments, but the logistic and economic demands it requires will make it impossible for festival organisers to consider it. Yet the job has to be performed. And interpreters have to be aware of this facet of their work and have to be prepared and trained to focus, on certain occasions, as much on words as on ideas.

As far as training is concerned, the issue is not a new one. As Danica Seleskovitch explained as early as 1965, three forms of speech exist (descriptive, dialectic and affective) to which three forms of interpretation correspond (an explanation, an argumentation, and an eloquence exercise).⁶ Obviously, speech

⁶ D. Seleskovitch and M. Lederer, *Interpréter pour traduire, fourth edition (Paris: Didier Erudition, collection "traductologie", 2001).*

can be a mix of those different forms, and the role of the interpreter is always to be absolutely faithful to the speaker. However, each form implies a more or less “*deverbalised*” interpretation. The interpreter will thus have to be more or less faithful to the words of the source speech. The explanatory, descriptive interpretation (e.g. technical or scientific debates, procedural discussions), totally devoid of emotive power, can be longer or shorter than the original, and also very free as far as reformulation is concerned. The most important thing is that the stream of thought should be perfectly conveyed and understood. The meaning is what matters, and the content of the interpretation prevails even if its form differs from the original. The argumentative interpretation (e.g. political negotiations, arbitration tribunals, where the stances of the participants are known beforehand) must scrupulously reflect the original speech and all the nuances of the words and terms chosen, as well as convey all the arguments and intentions of the speaker (threat, limitation, compromise, etc.). Both content and form matter. An eloquent speech (e.g. welcoming opening remarks, thank-you dinner or banquet speeches) is generally targeted at an audience, not at interlocutors. It aims at moving the audience and triggering emotions. When interpreting eloquence, the interpreter has to convey the same emotions, feelings and style, and therefore has to make a connection with the audience and find the right voice. During an eloquence exercise, the form is preponderant.

Despite the artificial character of such distinctions, it is nevertheless relevant to train interpreters in the different methods of interpretation they imply. When interpreting for an artist as eloquent as Makine, the form of the interpretation is essential. Words matter as much as ideas. no doubt I worked differently on that occasion; I had to be more creative than usual and to use linguistic *and* literary skills. I found the resources to do so in my own literary background. Was it a requirement to perform well that day? I don’t know. But the work I did was definitely of a stylistic, literary order. This is why I wonder today whether we should recognise the existence of a new facet in the role of interpreters. I felt on that special assignment that I was a sort of literary translator of the spoken word, a *literary interpreter*.

Daniel Gile has explained that if we accept a taxonomy for written translation which differentiates literary translation and the translation of essentially factual and informative texts (legal, medical, etc.), we could also use taxonomy for interpretation which clearly differentiates conference interpreting, court interpreting, and social/community interpreting.⁷ How would we classify the type of interpretation interpreters do when they work for artists and writers? I would be tempted to add a new category to this acknowledged taxonomy: that of *literary interpreting*.

More and more often today, artists and writers are invited to participate in various festivals worldwide. Very often, on those occasions, interpreters are hired to help them to convey their ideas, to spread their word, to explain their art, to talk about their work. Without these interpreters, the link with the target

⁷ Gile, *La Traduction, la comprendre, l'apprendre*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, linguistique nouvelle, 2005).

audience would not exist and consequently, the “artistic” value of many works of art would not be understood by speakers of other languages. In this respect, in the context of global communication, interpreters play an important part as literary interpreters in the process whereby art and literature become world art and literature.

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