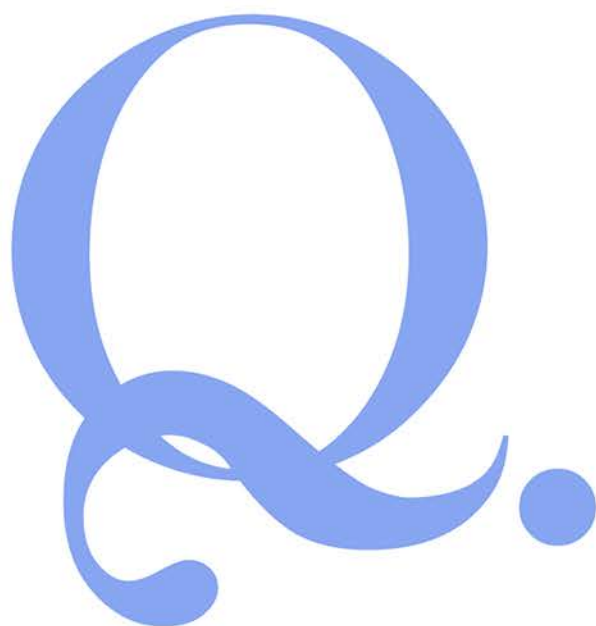# Solving the riddle of interpreting quality

Dimensions and challenges

Rafael Barranco-Droege *(ed.)*

EDITORIAL COMARES

Interlingua

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Solving the riddle
of interpreting quality

Dimensions and challenges

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To Ángela Collados Aís,
a human,
a timeless source of inspiration.

Contents

Introduction and outlook

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As with other social constructs, the existence and stability of any notion of quality depends on the level of interaction between the members of the community sharing that construct. Attitudes to and beliefs about interpreting quality are geographically diverse, and they have been constantly evolving over the past decades. For instance, in western countries, the insiders of conference interpreting have witnessed a transition from an idealistic notion of absolute quality attainable only by a small group of elite professionals to more a nuanced view facilitated by the spread of training programs and by research progress. The context in which interpreting takes place has also changed. In professional and political settings, speeches have become more technical and are delivered at higher speeds, and the widespread use of information and communication technologies means that potential audiences are now much larger. In the information age, users have a better command of foreign languages and thus feel empowered to display a more critical attitude towards the interpreting profession (and others) than earlier audiences did.

In view of these developments, practitioners and scholars have not remained idle. They have identified challenges and opportunities and have elaborated a variety of solutions. This volume offers a glimpse of the stimulating research on interpreting quality being performed in various subfields of interpreting studies. Each chapter has been peer-reviewed independently by at least two expert scholars.

For interpreters, quality is the primary concern, not only due to its importance in terms of their clients' personal rights, health and economic interests, but also because contractors are not always aware of the benefits of professionalism. In interpreting studies, quality has motivated a notable degree of dedication to certain lines of research, sometimes operating under other labels (e.g. *expertise*, *norms*), and it is also the prime mover in the investigation of a number of less obvious topics (e.g. *role*).

The most prolific of these research strands emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century and centered on conference settings. Inspired by the paradigm of quality control in the manufacturing industry, a number of scholars focused on how interpreter output is perceived. In various surveys, they investigated user expectations, satisfaction with the service, and indirectly their awareness of what the interpreter's job actually involves. The result was a large, methodologically consistent body of research work.

Two examples of survey-based research on perceived quality are included in this volume. In Austria, **Sylvi Rennert** (ch. 1) carried out an experiment on the impact of the fluency of a conference interpreter's delivery both on the users' perception of interpreter performance and also on their comprehension of the message. Her results are compatible with earlier findings suggesting that nonverbal features of interpreter delivery influence the users' evaluation of content-related features. In Mexico, **Lucila María Christen y Gracia** (ch. 2) conducted a study investigating whether the demographic characteristics of an interpreter are associated with differences in the evaluation of interpreting quality by a general audience. She contends that especially upwards of a certain age female interpreters may be judged more critically than their male colleagues.

In this type of research, quality is usually defined by extension and described in terms of a series of components or *quality criteria*. Survey findings suggest that some of them (most particularly *fidelity*) are considered indisputable requirements by most stakeholders, while the importance attributed to other criteria varies with the communication situation. Simplifying greatly, content-related aspects are considered paramount in conferences, a 'verbatim' rendition is expected in court settings, the paraverbal features of an interpreter's output become especially apparent in broadcast events, and behavior patterns tend to receive more attention in the realm of public service and community interpreting.

These differences determine the choice of research subjects in each subfield of interpreting studies, notably whether they concentrate on the social, the cultural, the cognitive or the linguistic dimension of mediated communication. But they also provide new opportunities for exchange.

One good example is **Michael Richardson**'s contribution (ch. 3). He advocates a new interpreting model that accounts for the impact of the interpreter's physical presence. His research revolves around sign-language interpreting in theatrical settings, but its implications for the definition of quality are much broader.

In interpreter training, summative assessment is more output-focused than diagnostic assessment. Some establishments have attempted to quantify the quality of their students' performance by using assessment grids with weighted scores, but validating these grids has proved to be a daunting task. In their turn, qualitative methods have been successful in shedding light on learning processes, as two chapters in this volume amply demonstrate. **Ewa Gumul** (ch. 6) analyzes recordings of simultaneous interpreting and retrospective protocols of advanced interpreting students to demonstrate that interpreters resort to explicitation not only to improve the communicative value and the accuracy of the target speech, but also as a coping tactic. **María Dolores Rodríguez Melchor** (ch. 7) has been using an online platform as a supplement to classroom training with a view to facilitating self-study and customized feedback. On the basis of the logbooks of two conference interpreting students, she illustrates the effects of practise time distribution and self-reflection on learning progress.

While conference interpreting has achieved a high level of professionalism and training takes place at university level in many countries, qualification opportunities are not so readily available for interpreters working in other settings. **Melissa Wallace** (ch. 4) analyzes a scheme devised to enable healthcare professionals to work as part-time interpreters. She highlights the importance of candidate screening, training, and certification, as well as the effect of interpreting quality on patients' health. **María Gómez-Amich** (ch. 5) has interviewed a number of lay interpreters who used to work in Afghanistan for the army of a western country. She finds that their interpreting decisions are heavily based on their beliefs about the parties' needs. This attitude may raise an eyebrow or two, but it is indisputably an example of functionalist theories in action.

In fact, although research on perceived quality focuses formally on interpreter output, it was probably initially motivated by functionalist views. Scholars have surveyed both outsiders (end users, contractors, the

general public) and insiders (interpreters, trainers, researchers), and the evidence collected over the years indicates that people do not necessarily share the same experiences, interests, and attitudes.

To learn more about the reasons for these differences, it is worth returning to a few central issues. What do we really know about our clients? What do they know about interpreter workflow? And to start on home ground, what do professional insiders know about each other?

The existence of 'silos' within the interpreting community is addressed in the final chapter of this volume by **Helle V. Dam**, **Barbara Ahrens**, **Brenda Nicodemus**, **Michael Richardson**, **Heidi Salaets,** and **Melissa Wallace**. They call for improved exchange between the vertices of a triangle of internal stakeholders made up by practitioners, trainers, and researchers, and make hands-on proposals for building up mutual trust and fostering cross-fertilization, such as tailored communication of research results and shared training opportunities. Taking this approach a step further, it would be very useful to initiate an honest discussion about the interests and contributions of professional associations and training institutions in a field in which academization is still incipient, and about the role of organizations acting as CISPs (conference interpreting service providers), which may ultimately displace the consultant interpreter as an individual figure.

This triangle of internal stakeholders must also be considered in a broader context. In a rapidly changing market, assuring and improving quality will require a more intensive exchange between each of its vertices and external stakeholders.

For researchers and trainers, relevant interlocutors include scholars from other fields, study participants, and students. As a young discipline, interpreting studies has not yet reached maturity in theoretical and methodological terms. However, in recent years it has been increasingly aware of its interdisciplinary nature, and long gone are the days when national schools and setting-specific lines of research developed in isolation. For its part, training practice is still strongly influenced by the master-apprentice model, and it would profit greatly from empirical validation. To do justice to such a complex human activity as interpreting, both research and training need to be placed on firmer method-

ological ground, and academic institutions need to provide scholars with more opportunities to incorporate findings from other disciplines.

Practitioners maintain relationships with a variety of stakeholders, including contractors, speakers, end users, and bystanders. All of them have been covered in survey-based research, following a paradigm that originated in business studies. This paradigm defines perceived quality in terms of the gap between the recipients' expectations and features of the units of output materializing in their absence. More recent paradigms acknowledge the customer's engagement in the production of goods and services from the outset, redefining this process as an exchange of skills: Producers and consumers are replaced by co-creators of value. These ideas will ring a bell with many a practitioner, as interpreting quality is conditioned by the amount and quality of the input received from customers. For insiders this is glaringly obvious, but clients may fail to respond appropriately if interpreters hesitate to voice their needs with regard to documentation and working conditions, which understandably happens when power imbalance and concerns about professional status come into play. Both sides would be better served by more fluent communication, and it goes without saying that integrating the workflows of interpreters and (corporate) customers will be superior to a purchasing policy based on provider bidding. The popularization of remote solutions has brought about many challenges in terms of working conditions, but also new opportunities of data exchange and partnership.

Describing and quantifying the costs and benefits of process integration between internal and external stakeholders would necessitate an interdisciplinary systems-oriented approach in each of its dimensions. Ethnographic observation, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and artificial intelligence can supply data on individual interactions and help us model verbal and nonverbal communication in interpreting settings. Social psychology, behavioral economics, game theory and cognitive science can improve our understanding of how individual impressions and decisions are made. Social ecology, cultural studies, and organizational studies can describe how internal and external communities of stakeholders shape and share discourse, as well as the creation and workings of professional and institutional systems, in particular with regard to information flows and power relations.

The resulting evidence would be instrumental in the development of efficient quality norms and standards that go beyond a black box approach and empower the professionals involved. Practical applications, such as the identification of interaction patterns and user profiles across settings, could be made available to freelance and in-house practitioners in ongoing training programs.

These goals are ambitious, and a system-wide endeavor like this one would require the joint effort of academic institutions, interpreter associations, and allied gatekeepers on the client side. But the future standing of the profession may depend on success in identifying and defending those market niches in which humans can outperform machine interpreting at sustainable prices, and its survival is also a fundamental interest of the technical and scientific realm, of business, of politics, and of society as a whole.

Acknowledgments

Interpreting is a complex phenomenon with semiotic, cognitive, and social dimensions. The second half of the 20th century witnessed increasing professionalization in this field, and in recent years, market conditions have been evolving rapidly. Communication has become faster and more technical, information and communication technologies have empowered users and altered workflows, societies are undergoing unforeseen transformations, and language regimes are changing, both in terms of diversification and of the use of lingua francas.

The challenges and opportunities associated with these developments call for a reframing of quality assessment and assurance. Output-focused research is being joined by investigation on cognitive and social processes, the various subfields of interpreting studies are beginning to gel, and research is becoming more interdisciplinary. This volume offers a glimpse of the stimulating research on interpreting quality made possible by the collaboration of scholars, trainers, and practitioners.