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Smoothing and Softening: The Interpreter as an Everyday Diplomat

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Being the only conversational participant with the ability to follow both sides of the cross-linguistic dialogue grants the interpreter the power to obscure or clarify. For the interpreter, it is therefore crucial to be completely trusted by both sides of the international dialogue in order to maintain professional credibility. My PhD project titled ‘Tact in Translation’ investigates this powerful but paradoxical role of interpreters as trust mediators. This article presents the results of my project’s pilot study. Drawing on interviews with professional Russian interpreters, this article analyses the different ways in which these interpreters manage to negotiate trust, mediating strongly differing or even directly opposing discourse. I argue that, by combining skilled representation with tactful mediation, interpreters can act as ‘everyday diplomats’.

Key words: interpreter, trust, mediation, everyday diplomacy

1. Introduction: What is gained in translation?

1.1. ‘Tact in Translation’ PhD research

The interpreter’s role as a trust mediator is inherent to the interpreter’s position (Robb & Greenhalgh, 2006). Since trust is continuously tested against the expectations of those involved, interpreters are constantly engaged in the building and continuation of trust relationships (Robb & Greenhalgh, 2006, Sztompka, 1999). Traditionally, trust in interpreted encounters depends on the interpreter’s impartiality: the more objective, distant and invisible, the better and more professional the interpreter (Wadensjö, 2008). Impartiality ranks high on the lists of characteristics of the ideal interpreter as presented in textbooks, interpreter training programs and codes of ethics (Rudvin, 2007). Although this image of the interpreter as an unbiased, in-between mediator who ‘just translates’ has been challenged in recent years, it is still prevalent in both academic and public discourse (Inghilleri, 2005; Wadensjö, 2008).

However, this ideal of the interpreter as an in-between figure is misleading (Bahadir, 2004; Bischoff et al, 2004; Hagedorn, 1988; Karttunen, 1994). It suggests that the interpreter operates in an ideological void, in a neutral space between different cultural and linguistic practices (Inghilleri, 2005). Instead, interpreters act in an inherently heterogeneous and hybrid place where cultures and meanings overlap (Inghilleri, 2005). They are “persons embedded in a society that possesses its own values, cultural norms, and societal blueprints” and therefore, like any other human being, “perceive reality through their own social lenses” (Angelelli, 2004:2). Alongside their own culture, interpreters have gained an understanding of a foreign one (Gambier & Doorslaer, 2010:144). This ‘fusion of horizons’ allows for comprehension of messages originally composed against another horizon (Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1960, as cited in Gambier & Doorslaer, 2010:144).

It is precisely the quality of being positioned firmly within and not between social/interactional spaces that turns the interpreter into an expert mediator, constantly making strategic assessments of the best way to get a message across. Interpreters are 'liminal' beings: people who are neither this nor that, but who can simultaneously be both (Turner, 1967:99). They are both "[i]ncluded in, and at the same time excluded from, the scene of interpretation" (Apostolou, 2001:3). As liminal beings both mark and transcend boundaries, they have the power to question categories and constantly shape definitions of what is considered to be 'normal' (Douglas, 1966:54-5). When does a message require more than 'just translation'? What needs to be added, deleted or changed in order to deliver a message across both a linguistic and cultural boundary? These questions form the basis of my PhD research titled 'Tact in Translation', which I started in September 2017 at University College London (UCL). I planned to answer them by carrying out ethnographic fieldwork in St. Petersburg, Russia. Before embarking on this long-term project, I decided to conduct explorative interviews with interpreters I had already met in the form of a pilot study. This study would give me an indication of the themes most relevant to Russian interpreters today, which were to be further researched during the main fieldwork period.

1.2. The pilot study

The pilot study was conducted in the spring of 2018 and consisted of five in-depth interviews with Russian interpreters. The results of this pilot study, all revolving around the idea of an interpreter as an 'everyday diplomat' (Hagedorn, 1988), are presented in this article. Following my pilot study, I conducted 33 additional interviews and participant observations during interpreted encounters. Additional paragraphs in the 'Results' section show the extent to which the pilot study was validated by the larger body of data that I gathered afterwards.

Scholarship on interpreting frequently focuses on what is lost in translation. Any deviation between the source language and the target language is considered a threat to neutrality, and therefore a failure (Raymond, 2014:44). Since these deviations are inevitable for various reasons (different cultural contexts and meanings, time pressure), interpreting is framed as a form of 'damage control'. An example of negative connotations surrounding interpreting can be found in Salacuse's (2013) book, in which he quotes an experienced executive stating that "involving an interpreter in negotiating a joint venture is a lot like trying to kiss your future spouse through a screen door" (Salacuse, 2013:117). Instead of focusing on what is lost in translation, this article offers insights into what is gained. Or, as an experienced Russian interpreter and lecturer of interpreting at a Western European university once told me:

Diplomats keep telling us [interpreters]: ‘Rehearse your vocabulary, be prepared.’ But actually, they could learn from us. We have a lot of soft skills we could teach them.¹

The quotation illustrates an interesting but rarely posed question: what can diplomats learn from their interpreters? What are the interpreters’ soft skills relevant to diplomacy, of which diplomats might not be aware? Below I will illustrate how, once we articulate the definition of what it means to be a diplomat in line with new studies of everyday diplomacy, an interpreter becomes a suitable candidate for investigation of everyday diplomatic practices.

According to both the online English dictionary *Lexico.com* (Oxford University Press (OUP), 2019) and the Russian dictionary *Tolkovyi slovar Ozhegova onlain* (Ozhegova, 2008), the word ‘diplomat’ has two main definitions: ‘An official representing a country’s foreign interests’ and ‘a person who can deal with others in a sensitive/refined and tactful way’². These two elements, a ‘representative’ and a ‘tactful mediator’, are also identified by Marsden (2016) and Constantinou (2016). Rachel Mairs, who in her 2011 article looks into the role of the interpreter in ancient history, finds evidence of an interpreter being viewed as a diplomat: he or she is both a skilled linguist and a skilled negotiator. Instead of exploring ancient texts, I will use these two categories to frame the preliminary results from the 2018 pilot study, focusing on everyday interpreting practices in contemporary Russia. In the course of the pilot interviews I came to understand that, for interpreters, everyday diplomacy consists of processes of ‘softening’ and ‘smoothing’. What this entails will be explored later in this article.

This article consists of five sections. The next section provides an overview of existing literature on everyday forms of diplomacy and interpreters. Subsequently, I will devote attention to the methods of the pilot study. In the fourth section I present the preliminary results of the fieldwork that I carried out in the spring of 2018. At the end of each sub-section, I mention to what extent the pilot study was validated by the body of data gathered for my larger PhD project afterwards. The conclusion forms the fifth and final part of this article.

2. Everyday diplomacy – a contradiction in terms?

Everyday life has become an object of study in its own right since the late 20th century (Scott, 2013). The everyday encompasses what we presume to be mundane and familiar, routine and repetitive; all that is ‘taken for granted’. Studying the everyday allows scholars to trace the way social patterns are reflected in the lives of individuals (Scott, 2013). It has the power to reveal “the

¹ All quotations were translated by the author.

² Besides these two definitions, the Russian dictionary notes a third one, referring to a specific type of briefcase.

unspecified assumptions that underlie the patterns of routine interactions and that account for much of the resilience and variability of daily existence” (Shevchenko, 2009:4).

The definition of the everyday that I find especially helpful is the one provided by Chatterjee et al in their introduction to the book *Everyday Life in Russia Past and Present* (2015:2). They describe their work as “an examination of the contact zones of daily life where grand historical events and ideological contests are personally experienced”.

Given the focus on ‘ordinary people’ in studies of the everyday, the concept ‘everyday diplomacy’ almost seems a contradiction in terms. This occurs for two reasons. First, although anthropologists studying the everyday aim to be inclusive, their work often reflects a class bias: rarely are the routine lives of the elite, such as diplomats, subjected to such analysis (Shevchenko, 2009:5). Instead, the groups that anthropologists traditionally study have usually been relatively poor and powerless (Kottak, 2010:13). The 2016 issue of the *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* on everyday diplomacy draws attention to this problem – a lack of a unified ‘anthropology of diplomacy’. This brings us to the second explanation of why ‘everyday diplomacy’ sounds contradictory. The classic notions of ‘conducting diplomacy’ and ‘a diplomat’ evoke associations of men in suits negotiating deals behind closed doors. According to Constantinou (2016:1), even critical IR scholars consider the term ‘diplomacy’ to be reserved for the work of diplomats representing sovereign territorial units only. However, scholars have increasingly urged us to “think about diplomacy beyond a formal professional or ascriptive role to understand it as a ‘mode of living’ not confined to those people authorized to conduct diplomacy” (Constantinou, 2016:143).

The first step towards a recognition of everyday forms of diplomacy came with the discovery that much of the official diplomacy carried out between states is conducted outside of formal meetings. Or, in the words of a diplomat cited in Enloe’s chapter on ‘diplomatic and undiplomatic wives’, “[a]ctually off-the-record conversations are the stuff of diplomacy” (Enloe, 2014:185). Recognising the human side of diplomats also meant that the sense of a singular diplomatic culture exclusively reserved for diplomats became untenable (Constantinou, 2016). The first definition of diplomatic culture, provided by Hedley Bull (1977:316, as cited in Constantinou, 2016:5), stated that it is “the common stock of ideas and values possessed by official representatives of states”. As scholars realised that diplomatic culture is not separable from local cultures, this focus on possession – some people have it whereas others have not – lost relevance.

This scholarly shift illustrated above came hand-in-hand with the acknowledgement of diplomatic qualities of ordinary people. New descriptions of what it meant to be a diplomat emerged, moving away from the notion that only official state diplomats could engage in diplomatic practices. Constantinou (2016:2) states that diplomacy occurs “whenever someone successfully claims to represent and negotiate for a territory or a group of people or a cause, or successfully claims to mediate between others engaging in such representations and negotiations.” He mentions the way film stars, athletes, scientists, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and others are tasked to serve as officially or media

appointed ambassadors of nations, communities and worthy causes (Cooper, 2008 as cited in Constantinou 2016:3). Reeves (2016) defines diplomacy as “a form of skilled practice for encountering and mediating difference in contexts of uncertainty”, potentially opening up ‘diplomacy’ to a much wider range of people.

Unfortunately, the increased scholarly recognition described above only reflects a minor field of study within the work of anthropologists, social historians, sociologists and political scientists. Overall, the grass-roots work of everyday diplomats rarely becomes the subject of scholarly attention (Marsden, 2016). The last few years have therefore witnessed a call for attention to so-called ‘low’ diplomatic cultures that arise in the daily non-official encounters with a wide range of ‘significant’ or ‘less significant’ others (Constantinou, 2013:10). Additionally, “[s]cholars of diplomacy have increasingly called for greater recognition of the ‘hidden continuities’ between ‘professional diplomatic intercourse’ and ‘everyday life’” (Marsden, 2016:15). With this study, I hope to offer such a perspective.

2.3. Interpreters as diplomats

If we look at the several definitions of everyday diplomacy given above, it becomes clear that these definitions reach beyond professional state diplomats. An early example of recognising the diplomatic role of non-state diplomats is Enloe’s chapter on diplomats’ wives (first published in 1990). In his 2016 article, Marsden calls for people living in ‘frontier realms’ to be recognised as ‘everyday diplomats’. He states that those people are frequently documented as being sophisticated boundary crossers endowed with the capacity to forge connections between politically divided spaces (Marsden, 2016:5). In the same volume, Morris (2016) highlights the role of researchers in Russia as everyday diplomats. In another, earlier article, Nicholas Cull (2008) makes a similar argument, recognising the urgent necessity to pay more attention to “the interpersonal level of communication and the people whose lives cross the international boundaries and who carry messages whether international actors like it or not” (2008:50). In his article, Cull is mainly talking about migrants, and although the 2016 journal considers a much wider scope of everyday diplomats, the concept of everyday diplomacy has not yet been used as a lens to study the role of interpreters (or translators, for that matter).

There are existing works mentioning the diplomatic role of the interpreter. However, they rarely recognise its ‘everyday’ character. Ruth Roland’s book *Interpreters as Diplomats: A Diplomatic History of the Role of Interpreters in World Politics* (1999), for example, although providing a comprehensive account of interpreters in diplomacy throughout history, reflects a rather ‘classical’ view of diplomacy – a practice taking place behind the closed doors of presidential offices, international organisations and embassies. Another example is provided by Brodskii (2011), who provides a list of situations in which an interpreter is confronted with political discourse. The list includes political negotiations and summits, speeches of political leaders and unofficial interpreting behind the scenes. However, “any translation, whether written or oral, always communicates an interpretation” (Venuti, 1998:5). This interpretation is inextricably linked with the political and the social side of the interaction, and the diplomatic role of the

interpreter. Since political discourse is not confined to those situations, interpreters act as everyday diplomats on many more occasions. Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2007:11) distinguish between ‘less controlled settings’ where the interpreter’s function is potentially more flexible, as opposed to ‘formal settings,’ such as at major international conferences and diplomatic visits, where the interpreter’s function is constrained by the event and therefore limited. I argue that, although the impact that the interpreter can have on primary interlocutors differs per situation, it is never fully absent and therefore forms an inherent part of the interpreters’ professional and social responsibilities.

In the short literature review given above, I have provided an overview of existing studies, demonstrating that exploring diplomacy as an everyday process carried out by non-state actors offers a highly relevant interdisciplinary framework for looking at the role of the modern Russian interpreter. Constantinou remarks that “not anything and everything is diplomacy, but rather that any actor and any encounter with otherness can be potentially diplomatized” (2016:4). Since this ‘encounter with otherness’ is necessarily part of every interpreter’s everyday routine, they form a particularly rich group for exploring everyday diplomacy.

3. Methods

During the pilot study, which took place in the spring of 2018, I mainly aimed to gather interpreters’ thoughts on their education and career so far, on how they view their role as an interpreter and on collecting examples of how concepts, such as loyalty and neutrality, play out in practice. I therefore conducted semi-structured interviews with Russian interpreters who work in Western Russia (4) or migrated to Western Europe (1). Besides Russian, their second or third language can be any Western European language. Although I use participant observation in later stages of my research, this was not part of the pilot study.

3.1. Participants

According to Gambier and Doorslaer (2010) there are three ways of distinguishing different interpreting practices in scientific literature. One is according to the setting in which they occur (community, conference, court, media, medical and telephone interpreting). The second way to categorise interpreting practices is according to the membership term of the interpreter (certified interpreters and natural translators). Finally, interpreting practices can be divided according to the interpreting mode (sign language, simultaneous interpreting, consecutive interpreting, relay interpreting and chuchotage).

Since the dynamics of personal contact during interpreted encounters are essential to this research project, I focus on ‘face-to-face interpreting’, when establishing good relations with the clients is especially key (Brodskii, 2012, Wadensjö, 1998). Based on the categories above, this means I include interpreters working in different settings (community interpreting, interpreting for business executives, diplomats or delegates attending international meetings). I work with professional interpreters who mainly interpret consecutively but can

also use 'chuchotage'. I exclude interpreters working exclusively in booths at the back of conference halls or other forms of distance interpreting. In these contexts, interpreters do not have any direct interaction with conference participants, thus "the opportunity for cooperation and co-construction of meaning during the interpretation is minimal" (Napier 2007:412).

I identified interpreters on the basis of my contacts obtained through my previous work at Pskov State University, the Dutch Institute in St. Petersburg (NIP) and the Dutch Consulate-General in St. Petersburg. I had met all these interpreters earlier. All five were women, leading to specific power dynamics between them and their employers. However, I will not cover this here.

3.2. The interviews

Before conducting the interviews, I prepared a list of themes I planned to cover. The main aim of these themes was to help myself visualise the topics that would be covered, not to give a blueprint for the flow of the conversation. Since I am interviewing in Russian, which is not my native language, it also allowed me to practise specific professional vocabulary. The order of the questions was not fixed; I adjusted the structure in the course of the interview.

At the start of the interview, I asked the participant to talk about herself, focussing on education and professional career. This helped to put the interviewee at her ease and suggested clues for me to follow up later. Subsequently, the interpreter's training was discussed. The main section covered the negotiation of trust. The last section gave the interpreters a chance to share their thoughts on the future of their profession. I asked open questions. Initially, I asked the interpreters to provide anecdotes, in order to take them back to the time of the recalled event. Subsequently, I encouraged them to reflect on these events and their positionality.

The interviews took place at the home of the informants (2) and in public spaces (3). The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. Upon consent of the participant, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

3.3. Consent and confidentiality

At the start of the interview, I provided the informant with a participant information sheet. Opt-in consent was recorded.³ Data were stored on the UCL server, only accessible with a password. Based on previous research with participants with similar occupations from this region, I did not expect my questions to touch on overly sensitive topics (Helmer, 2017).

Confidentiality is of key importance when interviewing interpreters, who are professionally obliged to keep the content of interpreted encounters secret. During the interviews I explained that I was not interested in names or dates, but primarily in their professional skills and strategies. I made clear that all participants and their information would be anonymised in any publication or presentation following from this research. Liubov, Natalia, Tatiana, Anna and Galina are pseudonyms. To further ensure anonymity I changed specific references to the foreign language of the interpreter with the words [foreign language], with square brackets indicating my interventions.

3.4 Analysis

During the interviews I made written notes, which helped me to add depth to the transcripts. These transcripts were subsequently analysed thematically using a form of grounded theory, an approach originally developed by sociologists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, as cited in Bernard, 2006). It is widely used to analyse ethnographic interview data (Bernard, 2006:492). The grounded theory approach is a set of techniques for (1) identifying categories and concepts that emerge from text, and (2) linking the concepts into substantive and formal theories. Although I used NVivo coding software later in my PhD research, I used colour coding during the pilot study, highlighting the transcripts in separate Word files.

The themes discussed during the interviews were partially based on my review of academic literature and partly on the input of the interpreters themselves. The themes I focus on in this article – smoothing and softening – indicate my preference for ‘inductive’ or ‘open’ coding. I had no codes ready before the analysis started. Instead, I used a technique called *in vivo* coding, which refers to a process in which the researcher uses actual phrases of their text — the words of real people — to name themes.

³ The following procedure was used: “Today is (date) and I am having a conversation with (name). From the information sheet and our conversation up to this point, do you: Understand that your data will be stored and processed anonymously? Understand that you can withdraw your data for up to 4 weeks after today? Understand that this recording will be destroyed after the end of the study, and that the anonymised transcript will be securely stored? Do you agree to take part in this study?”

4. Results: The interpreter as an everyday diplomat

4.1. A skilled representative

In Soviet times, those teaching translation and interpretation were very well aware of the representative role of the interpreter, as they repeatedly told their students “[r]odina nachinaetsia s perevodchika” (‘the motherland starts from the interpreter’) (Brodskii, 2012:160). My supervisor Anne White mentions similar experiences in her 2005 article ‘English Features in a Russian Mirror’, as she explains how during a meeting at the Foreign Office, the role of ‘ambassadors’ for Britain was firmly impressed upon her and the other students before they left to study in the USSR.

Interpreters are also frequently approached as political representatives and held accountable for the acts of their government. Jeremy Morris (2016) introduces the concept of ‘political testing’ of the researcher, a way in which Russian informants seek to uncover “to what extent the foreign researcher agrees with the big, hypocritical truth of the West.” This ‘testing’ is deemed necessary because the foreign researcher is perceived as ‘tricky’, as a potential spy. Given the ambivalent, arguably even more ‘tricky’ role of interpreters, they are similarly subjected to this ‘political testing’. Tatiana, an interpreter in her twenties, indicated that questions such as ‘what do you think of Crimea?’ really tire her. Her strategy of coping with this is pretending she knows nothing about politics in order to avoid awkward situations.

Sometimes, interpreters are directly asked to perform the role of a cultural representative. Natalia, an interpreter in her forties, recalled how she was often asked to ‘explain how it works here, for us’:

When you work with two sides, then the Russian people kind of asked ‘please explain to them, how it all works here’ [...] and the [foreigners] never asked me such a thing. Because the [foreigners] did not see me as [one of them]. Do you understand? He speaks [this foreign language] and he cannot expect of me that I completely understand the [foreign] culture, do you understand? And a Russian person, when they cannot handle it on his own, that happened a couple of times, then they asked me ‘please explain to them.’

I would like to draw attention to the representative role of the interpreter when it comes to the Russian language. Tony Foley’s 2006 study into the concept of the ‘client’ in legal interpreting points out that some interpreters see the language as their main client: the interpreter serves this language. Note that here the interpreter is acting as a ‘representative of the ideal Russian language’ to other speakers of that same language. Later we will move on to the role of the interpreter as other types of representatives.

To me it seems that the interpreter has a large responsibility towards the Russian language. Their Russian should be beautiful [...] Because I think that the most important responsibility, of course, it to transmit facts. But that goes without saying. Like, there's no such thing as an interpreter who does not do that. An interpreter has. To. Interpret. Correctly. Sure. But how he interprets, and if he manages to transmit this in beautiful, literate Russian, well I think that is the most important thing. That is why I think that in the first place an interpreter should love and know his Russian language. [...] Because all kinds of things happen. Suddenly a person is saying some unpleasant things, right? The interpreter can soften that a little bit. Not a lot, but just a little. So it would kind of look more 'cultured', right?

This remark, made by Natalia, illustrates that the Russian produced by interpreters should be 'beautiful', and that an interpreter should primarily 'love' their language. The language should be 'cultured' (*kulturnyi*). Jennifer Patico, in her 2005 article, elaborates on this term. In this context, one teacher interviewed by Patico (2005:484) describes *kulturnyi* in a way I think is relevant here. She refers to someone who is respectful of others and "[knew] how to behave in a given situation." This links to the second definition of a tactful mediator that I will discuss in the next section.

The interpreter's role as a representative is not unambiguous. According to Bellos (2011:63), the history of the European nation state founded on linguistic uniformity has resulted in "a fairly profound confusion of language and nationality." Since interpreters bring language, a mark of national prestige, to the international arena, it is often interpreters who are treated with suspicion (Mairs, 2011). Rachel Mairs (2011:70) found several occurrences of this in ancient history. She gives some examples where identity and language are intertwined to such an extent that interpretation and translation are framed as 'linguistic prostitution', treating language as a 'commodity' and translation as 'betrayal'. Ruth Roland gives the example of Bismarck, who once commented that "no Englishman who was fluent in French could be trusted" (Roland, 1999). The issue of trust is key for interpreters, sometimes valued even more than language knowledge itself.

Analysis of the data collected after the pilot study further confirms that interpreters do not only act as representatives of their country, but also of their client's company or department. Interpreters stress how they strive to become 'one of them' by using appropriate vocabulary and following the client's dress code. For some, being mistaken for someone specifically educated and/or employed in their client's field is one of the best compliments they can receive. In my larger PhD study, I further explore this representation beyond the nation.

4.2. A tactful mediator

A second definition of an interpreter is "one who can deal with others in a sensitive/refined and tactful way." The interpreters I talked to described one of the main tasks of the interpreter as to '*sgladit*' (smoothen) or '*smiagchit*' (soften). Brodskii (2012:161) writes about this process, stating that both verbal and non-

verbal behaviour of the interpreter should be slightly more neutral than that of the client, characterised by a more restrained tone and gestures. Interpreters refer to this as the 'psychological' side of their job.

An example given by Anna, an interpreter in her forties, occurred during a visit of Russian factory workers to a foreign factory. After a tour of the factory both parties sat down and the Russian visitors were asked what they thought of the factory. The interpreter explained how one of the workers started loudly complaining that everything was horrible, and that at their factory in Russia it was much cleaner and safer. The interpreter explained how the rest of the group looked at this one person in astonishment, and she decided to do the following:

I really really softened his intonation, that aggressive tone, and I pretended that it was like, 'well it seems to me, that in our factory a little more attention is devoted to safety procedures...' When you talk with such an intonation, it's much easier for people to accept, compared to when you talk like 'Your factory is... [imitates loud voice of the worker]'

Besides this 'softening' of verbal expressions, the interpreter can play a role in explaining non-verbal behaviour of one party to the other. Below we look at an example of such an occasion during which Liubov, an interpreter in her sixties who migrated to Western Europe, 'smoothened' the situation:

There was this dinner. The [foreigners] had invited everyone to this dinner, but it lasted so long... and the Russians had already had enough.... It's all just blablabla... [...] They were so sick of it, so he stands up and starts to walk around [...] That one Russian, he was the main one in that delegation, so he started to walk around, and the [foreign] people are looking at him, 'what's going on?' He was sitting at the table and now... he's just walking around! [...] all the others were still sitting. And the director asked me 'well what's going on? And I tell him: 'he's finding it tough; we should be going.' And that's it, everyone understood. I smoothed it.

This example shows that the interpreter takes on the role of a mediator, translating not only the words but also the behaviour of one party to the other.

Finally, the interpreter can be directly approached as a negotiation expert. Galina, an interpreter in her thirties, explained how she is regularly asked for advice during the breaks in between negotiations. They would ask her questions such as 'Do you think he is being honest with us?' or 'What do you think, what kind of impression did we make?' or 'What do you think, should we tell them this now or not?' Although Galina told me that she usually shares her thoughts in these situations, others have a different strategy; they prefer to get back to the speaker, asking him or her for an explanation, and subsequently transferring this information back to the other party. It is not uncommon for clients to ask the interpreter for an explanation of a certain tradition or his/her personal take on current affairs. Salacure (2013:117, 126) even encourages his readers to ask their interpreters to provide them with insights into the culture and business practices of the other party, how the local culture affects the negotiation process, communications between the parties, structure of the proposed transaction, and

the execution of the deal itself, as well as whether the other party is trustworthy and reliable. These situations turn the interpreter into an expert in the field of international relations in the widest sense of the term (Brodskii, 2011:104).

More recent analysis of the main body of data shows the limitations of the 'smoothing and softening' of intonation and gestures. Because they are visible to both parties, regardless of the interpreter's efforts, the interpreter 'performs neutrality' within a limited framework. Once discrepancies between the source text and the translation become too visible, the interpreter risks sparking suspicion and subsequently losing the client's trust. The same goes for providing explanations: once the translation turns out much longer than the original, even clients who do not speak both languages notice this difference and might lose confidence in the interpreter.

4.3. Linguistic tools available for softening

Pollabauer (2004) lists several strategies used by interpreters to switch loyalty during asylum hearings in Austria. For example, they selectively transfer from using 'we' to 'the officer says', when they (consciously or unconsciously) feel the need to indicate their loyalty. Brodskii (2012) illustrates how during certain exceptional cases, interpreters can deviate from the norm of first-person interpreting. Examples are interpreting during interrogations of prisoners of war (when differences between 'us' and 'them' are particularly pronounced) or when interpreting for a criminal with 'blood of children on his hands'. Hlavac's (2017) research mentions the interpreters' use of hedges as softeners, such as changing human-agent constructions to impersonal ones and hesitation in delivery.

During the next stage of my PhD research, I further explore these dynamics, particularly paying attention to why interpreters choose to deviate from the standard first-person interpretation and feel the need to take a step back.

4.4. Imperfection

Finally, I would like to devote some attention to the issue of perfection. In the words of Jean Delisle (2009:31) "[i]nterpreters are not allowed to make mistakes. They are like trapeze artists who perform spectacular feats without a net." Interpreter training programs set the unattainable goal of accuracy as an attainable reality. As a result, tension emerges between the prescribed and the actual role of the interpreter (Angelelli, 2004; Wadensjo, 2004). Given the combination of the fact that there is no such thing as 'the ideal translation' and the time pressure put on interpreters, a certain degree of imperfection is inevitable. Even the best interpreters fail from time to time. Remarkably, it is precisely this unattainable perfection that creates an exceptionally wide room to manoeuvre for the individual interpreter (Merlini, 2009). The examples of 'smoothing' and 'softening' that I gave earlier illustrate this.

However, interpreters do not always view this inevitable imperfection as an opportunity. When asked when they feel satisfied after a day of work, the more perfectionist interpreters answered with a long silence, finally leading to the answer that they might be perfectionists who never feel quite satisfied. This feeling that one should have done better leads to stress, as Natalia explained:

Of course, we all make blunders, and I, of course, have also made them, I know, well every time probably, you think 'well that should have been interpreted in a different way. There I messed up some of the numbers', that also happens. But specifically, that moment, when... you're standing there and you're silent and everyone is looking at you, and... you can't say anything, because you're in shock, and stress, and you... you think 'well, that's the end'.

One way of coping is described by Tatiana as '*slegka pofigizm*', freely translated as 'slightly not caring'. She gave the following example:

[U]sually all assignments are like 'let's go to the factory and talk. There we'll have an excursion through some machine-building department.' I'm aware that I don't know anything about all this. I don't know these words in Russian, let alone in [this foreign language], probably. But I think 'well, never mind'. After all I know [this foreign language], and they don't.

What could play a role here is the audience. In situations where other people in the room speak both languages, one cannot afford the approach of the second interpreter, as one feels more checked upon by people in the audience. In such sessions, which happen regularly in St. Petersburg, the power of the interpreter as the single mediator in the conversation is limited.

During further interviews, this explanation suggested above was validated. It turned out that the language itself plays a role. Since English is more widespread than, for example, Danish, interpreters are more aware that someone in the room might be 'checking on them'. This in turn can result in stress among interpreters, whose profession already tends to suffer from a lack of recognition in the first place. I explore themes such as professionalism and the social status of interpreters in present-day Russia in my larger PhD project.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted some of the preliminary results of the 2018 pilot study. The main idea that I presented was the need to acknowledge interpreters' role as 'everyday diplomats'. Interpreters are flexible representatives who do not only 'interpret' but also 'soften', 'smoothen' and 'explain' on an everyday basis. Examples given show how they act as diplomats at both levels identified as being key to diplomacy: skilled representation and skilled mediation.

Additionally, I have highlighted the personal character of interpreting strategies. An interpreter is very much a 'lone wolf' (Brooksii, 2012:167) who has to find the balance between the neutrality required in theory and the practice of everyday life. Every interpreter comes up with his or her own strategies of 'softening' and 'smoothing'. Some struggle with their personal loyalty and their expected neutrality, others do not find this difficult at all. Some are perfectionists, others are aware of the power they have as the only mediator and do not care as much or even love the adrenaline that comes with stress.

Furthermore, I have provided insight into my work in progress by incorporating paragraphs that point out the relation of the pilot study to the main body of data, collected after the pilot study. The analysis of the main body of data validated the findings of the pilot study presented here. Certain themes that have already come up during the pilot study are now emerging in more detail. Examples pointed out above are the role of gender, representation beyond the nation, limits to 'smoothing and softening', loyalty, professionalism and the social status of the interpreter in present-day Russia. In the writing-up stage of my current research I will further explore these themes.

Finally, I am grateful for the cooperation of the interpreters so far, for sharing their experiences and allowing me to join them during their fascinating work.

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