

QUALITY OF INTERPRETING FROM USERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

Translation and interpreting have outstanding roles in facilitating communications among different nations and even the people of the same nation by removing the language barriers. Interpreting Studies demands its own unique features (Pöchhacker, 2004, p. 39), particularly in terms of “quality”, a notion which has become a significant paradigm in every society, and is considered as a major criterion in the process of interpreting professionalisation. Interpreting quality research commenced since 1980. It was characterised by qualifying standards by the most experienced peers alongside with a vague and general definition of “good” interpreting (Setton & Motta, 2007, p. 202). However, assessing the interpreters’ performance by different parties involved in interpreting scene such as other interpreters, users, and clients have been among the dominant approaches to determine characteristics of “good” quality. Assessment (or judgment) mainly depends upon the assessor(s)’ intention. On the other hand, evaluation of expectations is another approach used by the researchers, mostly through survey studies. Optimal information about the “customer” expectations, preferences, their feedback and what they wish for may enable us to act more effectively for different purposes such as a better communication with the users, and provide a helpful guide for clients, instructors, users, and interpreters. Interpreters as service providers who are responsible to initiate and set up effective communication between speakers and listeners have interest in “meeting their users’ needs to the best of their ability” (Kurz, 2003, p. 4). The present paper, which is a part of an ongoing PhD research, focuses on users’ perspectives of interpreting service and the necessity to accentuate this facet in interpreting sphere, and to approach the best how of facilitating user investigations.

Interpreting quality

We live in an era obsessed with quality control (Kahane, 2000). Generally, quality is defined as the degree of excellence, and a degree of conformance to a standard. The concept of quality is primarily adopted from other interdisciplinary issues such as quality control, quality management etc. Quality of service is deemed as one of the main issues by International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC). Despite the consensus on some aspects of interpreting, there is still no definite conception of what good interpreting or good quality is. A report by AIIC (1982, p.1) describes quality as “that elusive something which everyone recognises but no one can successfully define”.

Interpreting quality has been sought at different levels, allocating parts of it to the expectations and the relevance for different user groups as well as the interpreters and clients. In this respect, Tommola (2003, p.125) states that evaluation of quality is based on “extraction of the users’ perspectives based on their personal ideas”, “implementation of different effectiveness analysis”, “analyses of the professional situation”, and “determining the significance of the quality criteria by the old peers or the professional interpreters”. Survey researches as empirical studies on quality of interpreting as well as case-based studies have been conducted through different approaches considering perspectives and perceptions of different parties.

Users’ perspectives

User is defined by Kurz (2001, p.394) as the target audience or the recipient of interpretation. She deems users as the most important criterion for the concept of quality. Déjean le Féal maintains that our ultimate goal must be to satisfy our audience” (1990, cited in Kurz 1993, p.14), and Kopczynski puts that any interpreting output is intended for listeners of interpreting (Kopczynski, 1994). Vuorikoski (1995, p. 173) accentuates the role of the listener by asserting that an interpreter should try hard in achieving good quality in interpreting by focusing on the listeners’ different demands. The necessity of the language adjustment to the expectations of the listeners is also highlighted by Dahl (2006, p. 39). Users of interpreting, their expectations and perspectives play significant roles in defining quality and the ways to achieve “good” quality. According to Marrone (1993, p.35) the need to survey users’ expectations and their preferences and achieving “good” quality is one of the fundamental aims of interpreting events. Users and their perspectives were limited to a few “anecdotal” and “impressionistic” images of the expectations from interpreters and interpreting service, at the first stages. Apart from those authors who deem interpreters as the only significant criterion in interpreting, there are others who accentuate that users and their points of view should/must come first in defining and outlining the quality of the interpreting service. Listener’s role is emphasised by Vuorikoski (1998), asserting that an interpreter should try hard in achieving good quality in interpreting by focusing on the listeners’ different demands and that any interpreting output is intended for its listeners.

The importance of users, as receivers of interpreting service, are highlighted because of “at least indirect feedback” that this awareness of their perspectives can give to every party in interpreting scene, interpreters in particular (Stenzl, 1983, p.44). Seleskovitch states “interpretation should always be judged from the perspective of the listener and never as an end in itself. The chain of communication does not end in the booth!” (1986, p. 236).

What is meant by “good” interpreting in the users’ viewpoints? What are their preferences? What characteristics do they consider as important and which ones are conceived unimportant? How do the perspectives and expectations vary according to different background variables? These are a set of questions that most of interpreting quality researchers seeking quality from users’

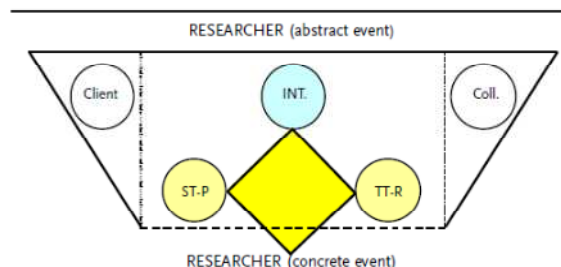
perspectives have been trying to answer. Several studies such as Seleskovitch (1986), Kurz (1989, 1993, 2001), Gile (1990, 2003), Vuorikoski (1993, 1995), Kopczynski (1994), Pöchhacker (1995, 2001), Moser (1996), Moser- Mercer (1996), Shlesinger (1997), Kahane (2000), Grbić (2008), Berber-Irabiien (2010), regarding their designs, methods, quality criteria, etc. have highlighted the users' perspectives and perceptions. For instance, Kurz, as a pioneering researcher who conducted the first survey study on quality from users' perspectives in 1989, concludes that not only different user groups might have different expectations, but even the members of the same user groups might vary in terms of the expectations each of them might have (Kurz, 1993, p.20). Moser's research in 1996 proved the same claim. Moser's attempt in conducting such an investigation using interviews was to find answers to questions such as: What is regarded as good interpretation in the users' perspective? How they (users) rank the quality criteria according the degree of importance they ascribe to each quality criteria? Is conference type and size effective in the users' viewpoints and their expectations of quality and to what extent is this variable in different conferences? It was found that there were differences between users in the significance they attributed to each criterion. For example, in Moser's study it was found that essentials in contrast to completeness of rendition received a higher preference in the larger meetings and also with the increase of age the respondents gave priorities to essentials. Other background variables such as experience, gender, etc. also represented the previous conclusions on the varieties of users' expectations according to their individual characteristics and background variables (Moser, 1996). Moser's survey was funded by AIIC and it is regarded as one of the mostly referred researches by far. However, enough attention should be paid in making generalisations, because every situation is bound to its specific features and contextual characteristics. Kurz (2001, p.394) regards users as the most significant component of quality notion. Most of the surveys conducted so far prove that different user groups with different features or background variables such as age, gender, experience, etc. might not have the same expectations of interpreting quality criteria. Among wide range of hypotheses, the hypothesis that different user groups have different expectations has also been tested by researchers such as Kurz (1989), Moser (1996), etc. Shlesinger (1997) maintains that quality of interpreting needs high standards. In this regard, Kalina (2005, pp.768-772) states that "interpreting is but one of many services the quality of which is essential and must be guaranteed". Despite the consensus on some aspects of interpreting to help improvements in the quality discussion and that there have been trainings on how or what interpreters "shall not do or shall not be" (Clifford, 2005, p.97), there is no definite conception of what good interpreting or good quality is.

Evaluation of quality is deemed "difficult", because quality is the sum of several heterogeneous aspects (Garzone, 2003), but it is viable by taking into account the interaction of all the variables including the actors such as interpreters, clients, and users and their perceptions of quality in a specific context. These variables might range from the interpreter with his/her unique knowledge and style of interpreting, and the audience to non-human features such as subject matter, size and

the languages of the conference. Quality can be broken down and (sub) categorised into several separate criteria. For survey research, it is possible by considering interpreters, users, clients, and professional conference organisers' (PCO's) perspectives as the acting subjects and multiplying the number of the common parameters. However, fluctuant individual tastes, background variables, and socio-linguistic influences and circumstances as well as the types of the communicative events in a conference interpreting setting would add to the complexity of the analysis of variation degree in evaluating quality in such survey studies.

Pöchhacker's (2001) model on perspectives of quality in interpreting

Pöchhacker's (2001) model represents the relationships between various points of view and positions for "subjective" measurement, as well as the "objective features of the textual product". Researcher's role in interpreting event is depicted representing that different participating perspectives of quality in interpreting can be viewed from two angles. An "external observer" implements a research approach in interpreting and is eager to measure the "objective" characteristics of the textual product. Therefore, an external observer can observe and seek the requirements, standards, etc. in abstract or concrete settings. Pöchhacker adds that it is also possible to measure subjective perspectives and judgments through the model, illustrating the relationships between the various positions and perspectives.



Coll: colleague, INT: interpreter, ST-P: source-text producer, TT-R: target-text receiver)

Figure 1. Perspectives on quality in interpreting (Pöchhacker, 2001)

In this model by "abstract" event, Pöchhacker means "hypothetical or previously experienced interpreting event", and by "concrete", or the virtual interpreting situation, he means "communicative event in a given communication situation" which indicates direct accessibility of the researcher to the event (Pöchhacker, 2001, p. 412). Therefore, the researcher in a concrete event may concentrate on two perspectives of "recordable product" or the "overall process of communicative interaction" which are of high significance in quality assessment and standards. Consequently, a researcher as an external observer may query the viewpoints either "off-site" with regard to an abstract interpreting event or with reference to a concrete communicative event in a given situation. Considering the relationship between different perspectives on quality, as

depicted for abstract and concrete events, Pöchhacker maintains that interpreters, users (source-text producers and target-text receivers), clients and colleagues' points of view and their positions on interpreting quality highlights these two significant analytical distinctions.

Expectations Vs assessment

The concepts of assessment and expectations must be clarified due to their distinct features in interpreting studies. Assessment (or judgment), entails expressing whether some quality criteria are met by the interpreter under evaluation. In contrast, expectations are the perceptions or the generic views of what one expects from an interpreting (Pöchhacker, 2004). In conference interpreting, evaluation of expectations from interpreting service is carried out before the service provision. On the other hand, assessment of interpreting quality is after the use of interpreting service in the sessions, and mainly depends on the assessor(s)' intention (Kurz, 1997). Interpreting Quality Assessment became distinct from the late 1980s by demands for professional standards which brought about Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) and IQA (Clifford 2005, pp.95-6).

Based on AIIC's report in 1995, standards play the main role in assessing quality from interpreters' perspectives, and service-providers set their standards based on the previously identified standards. There are several common criteria such as accuracy, clarity or fidelity, or other product-oriented criteria which are regarded fundamental in assessing quality, despite the various terminologies in different studies (Pöchhacker, 2001). Quality assessment might have drawbacks such as when a listener misses a message or a part of it. Comparative studies of expectations and assessment of quality criteria show that the degree of importance attributed by the same research subjects to quality criteria might vary. In this respect, Collados Aís (1998/2002, cited in Pöchhacker, 2004, p.157) compared expectations of 42 specialists who used interpretation, and 15 professional interpreters with the same subjects' assessment of a simulated interpreting performance delivered with either monotonous or lively intonation and came to striking conclusions. She concluded that subjects were not influenced by the monotonous intonation distinctly, despite they attributed lower importance to delivery features in the expectation survey and the overall quality criteria. On the other hand, content errors in the lively or "melodic" interpretation did not produce low scores. This proves that the criterion of "fidelity", which is ranked highly by the users, is not regarded by them as the top criterion when they assess the interpretation after listening to it. They tend to judge or assess according to such "secondary" criteria as fluency and lively delivery.

Users as customers

Why a customer-centered definition of quality should be emphasised? Why users should be the first group to be satisfied with the service they receive? Marketing experts believe that quality "must begin with customer needs and end with customer perception" (Kotler & Armstrong,

1994, 646). In this case, quality is regarded as the sum of the features and characteristics of a product or service that can satisfy a given need. There is no reason not to apply this marketing principle in conference interpreting industry. Customers' needs, perceptions, characters significance, and expectations from the service and the service provider, should be understood by the service/product providers in every marketing field, including conference interpreting industry. Quality service is delivered by a service provider when "its/his product/service meets or exceeds customer needs, requirements and expectations" (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994, p.553).

However, customers may experience various degrees of satisfaction of that specific service, according to their particular needs and expectations. Customer satisfaction is based on the product/service performance relative to a "buyer's expectations". It is evident that the better the service/product performance with respect to that product/service users' expectations, the higher the customers' satisfaction. In order to achieve/approach such quality, the service providers should identify the expectations of target customers and their viewpoints. In this regard, AIIC, as a professional organisation which always attempts to improve its standards, together with ensuring its members' performance has set obviously user-oriented quality standards.

Analysing the users' background variables and profiles is an approach which should remove or at least pave the way for the profession aims. However, evaluation of quality through users' perspectives, expectations, preferences, and needs is a complementary-and not exclusive-approach with other "self-imposed" standards of the service providers.

Guidelines for methodological facilitation: Background variables and conference features

1. Background variables

These are the suggested variables that can help a researcher categorise users based on their background features.

i. Age

The relationship between age and perspectives of quality can help distinguish among different age groups and their range of expectations, needs, and other points of view. Moser (1996) divided the age groups into four groups of under 30, 30-45, 46-60, and above 60. He concluded that different age groups have different expectations. For example, the older the respondents, the more important they considered the criterion of "faithfulness to meaning". In Zwischenberger and Pöchhacker's study (2010), they found that younger respondents rated several quality criteria differently when compared to their older partners. There were three age groups classifications in their study, including a) 30-47 years, b) 48-57 years, c) 58 years and above. The youngest group ranked the sample with "monotonous intonation" significantly better ($X=3.84$) than the middle age group (48-57 years: $X=3.53$) and oldest group ($X=3.63$). For audio sample with lively intonation, the youngest and the oldest

groups rated almost identically ($X=3.86$ for the youngest, $X=3.84$ for the oldest), while the middle group rated lower ($X=3.74$). They concluded that unlike older professionals, “younger interpreters are not as receptive to the presence or absence of the parameter of lively intonation”.

ii. Gender

Gender difference has been played out mostly in describing practices of translation. Simon (1996, p.2) states that “gender difference has been played out not only in the metaphors describing translation, but in actual practices of translation”. Gender in Zwischenberger and Pöchhacker’s study (2010) had “statistically significant effect” as the ratings of the female respondents were different from their male partners in a way that the females’ total mean were higher than the males (3.82 for female interpreters, 3.58 for male interpreters). This statistics showed the fact that generally females attribute higher marks to the quality criteria than their male partners and in other words are “generous judges” than the males. Similarly, Classifying users according to their gender can be contributive in finding such significances.

iii. Conference-going experience

According to Setton and Motta (2007, p.217), experience is a “predictor of quality” when judged by users. Studies have shown that users with different conference experiences ascribe different priorities to the quality criteria. For instance, in Moser’s (1996) study, analysis of the data proved that users with little-to-average experience of attending conferences attribute greater importance to “essentials” than to “completeness of rendition”. Also, fifty three percent of the more experienced respondents and 35 % of the less experienced respondents spontaneously mentioned the criterion of faithfulness to meaning as important.

iv. Educational level

Educational level can be another distinguisher between the users. Educational level and interpreters’ expectations were sought in Zwischenberger and Pöchhacker’s study (2010). In the case of “lively intonation”, for example, those with and without higher educational level rated this criterion respectively as ($X=3.91$) and ($X=3.61$). Hence, not all the rated criteria were different according to educational level (e.g. no such difference was observed for “monotonous intonation”).

v. Mother-tongue

“The main active language” of interpreters was taken into account in Zwischenberger and Pöchhacker’s study (2010). They found that interpreters’ A languages had “statistically significant impact” on the rating of the audio samples. Those who had English as their A languages gave the “strictest” total mean (3.30) compared to those with French (3.67) or German A languages (3.84). However, mother-tongue or the first language that a person acquires during childhood in an L1-speaking family or environment is suggested to be adopted to distinguish users’ perspectives based on this feature.

2. Conference features

By classifying conference features, it would be easier to approach any relation between them and quality.

i. Conference typology

Moser’s (1996) concluded that “no clear distinction” was observed by conference types (Moser 1995, p.9). In Zwischenberger and Pöchhacker’s study (2010), 43.3% of interpreters answered “yes” when they were asked “whether the importance of the quality criteria varied depending on the type of meeting”. The other interpreters rated 17.6% as “Not sure, maybe” and 39.1% as “no”.

This typology can include:

- Conference size
- Diversity of conference topics
- Form of the interaction between the participants in a conference

Conclusions

Nowadays, the notion of “quality” has become one of the most significant paradigms in every society. Users, as the receivers of interpreting, their expectations and perspectives play significant roles in defining quality and the ways to achieve good quality. For the purpose of this paper, a customer-oriented definition of quality is considered, i.e. quality as user satisfaction. Satisfaction of the audience as the ultimate goal in interpreting is only possible by bearing this in mind that interpreting must always be targeted upon a specific audience. Conference interpreting service providers, including interpreters, are advised to consider the customers of their services as the most important component in their market. Achieving/approaching users’ satisfaction and figuring out if their expectations, preferences match the quality of the service they receive is mainly possible by acknowledging information through their profiles and characteristics of users.

Such profiles which vary by customers, situations, and settings can be attained by implementing background variables and features of the conferences that users attend (Kurz, 2003). In a nutshell, users' perspectives and preferences are among the wide range of the potentials in identifying, defining and achieving a good interpreting quality. By specification of the target group's points of view, an interpreter selecting particular methods, style, language, etc. would be able to estimate the users' points of view and even problems in using interpreting service, and eventually this can help promoting quality. However, quality discussion, particularly in terms of its evaluation, is highly bound to its setting.

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