Searching for creativity in simultaneous interpreting

Some may say impossible, but translation and interpretation are creative acts in and of themselves.

Marzena DRABEK.
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It might seem that the term “creative” should be confined to the fine arts or musical composition where the product, be it a sculpture or an opera, is born in a moment of wondrous inspiration experienced by an ingenious creator. We are used to associating creativity with inventions, original solutions and innovative ways of thinking and of perceiving the world.

And so it wouldn’t be surprising to hear, “Creativity in simultaneous interpreting? It doesn’t exist!” Those who think along such lines will say that interpreting is simply the meticulous transfer of the thoughts and words of the speaker to another language, the “translation” of his/her creativity into another linguistic code. Nothing creative in it.

Or is there? Let’s consider the following definitions/notions of creativity:

- Creativity is a novel combination of elements which are commonly thought of as being independent and different, the ability to form new combinations (Mednick).

Isn’t simultaneous interpreting (SI) exactly this – the combining of the elements of the source message into a new target message meaningful to the listener, sometimes necessitating alterations to place the message in the cultural context of the target language? Interpreters take into account and combine seemingly independent elements: words; the intention of the speaker expressed through prosodic features and extralinguistic cues; the audience and their expectations and background; the conference setting; the current political situation; cultural background, etc. Don’t these elements seem independent to a layperson?

- Creative actions involve choices that are not determined by pre-set rules; creativity involves open-ended tasks with no pre-determined solutions. Creative process is based on unregulated selection and its effects cannot be subject to absolute verification (Ludskanov).

In interpreting, the only rule one must abide by is not to betray the speaker. There are no rules specifying word equivalents between source and target languages; it is up to the interpreter to choose the most appropriate at any given time, in any specific setting, for any concrete audience. Isn’t that an open-ended task? One might say, “No, because the choices are pre-determined by the preceding context and limited to the grammatical and verbal inventory of the target language”. But what about situations in which syntactic or semantic ambiguity have not been resolved or when the speaker uses nonce words? It is then up to the interpreter’s
inventiveness and creativity, isn’t it? Certain forms of music impose rules on the composer. Aren’t such limitations comparable to the grammatical and verbal constraints faced by interpreters? A composer may break with convention in the search for a novel form of expression. Likewise, the interpreter may veer off the beaten path – for example by inventing neologisms for terms that yet have no standard equivalent in the target language. And add to that one more question: are there ever two identical interpretations of the same “text”?

- Creativity involves problem-solving (Guilford) and problem-identification (Csikszentmihaly).

Isn’t this the case in simultaneous interpreting as well?

- Creativity necessitates divergent thinking manifested by fluency (verbal fluency for example), flexibility (the ability to use different strategies when solving a problem), originality and elaboration (ability to develop ideas with appropriate specification). Transformation - restructuring and reorganising facts - is also a sign of creativity (Guilford).

Isn’t that what is most welcome in simultaneous interpreting?

- According to the Componential Model of Creativity, creativity is driven by intrinsic motivation (passion and love for what one is doing) and conditioned by the mastering of the domain-relevant skills (tools and techniques necessary to perform a given task) (Amabile).

A quick examination of the numerous studies on job-satisfaction among interpreters reveals that most really like what they do, which shows a high degree of intrinsic motivation. In any field, one must come to master basic skills; only then can one go beyond them, breaking rules or rearranging elements in ways that are “creative”. This would seem to apply to SI.

- One of the features of creative reasoning is recategorisation (Brinck).

Interpreters are constantly recategorising. They do not always replace a verb with a verb or a noun with a noun. In fact, interpreters habitually change the categories of the source words to adjust for the linguistic habits and expectations of the target listener and to do justice to the grammatical and verbal system of the target language.

All these considerations mean that one should think twice before denying creative value to simultaneous interpreting. Obviously, we are not placing the creativity of the interpreter on the same plane as that of the poet or painter who creates ex nihili. But a creative aspect is certainly present in the process of simultaneous interpreting.

It remains, however, a great challenge to define the type of creativity manifested in interpreting. It might be fitting to approach creativity as a task-specific phenomenon - different for each domain. As challenging as it seems, one could attempt to identify task-specific creativity-relevant skills in SI.

The author would welcome a discussion of creativity in simultaneous interpreting. In addition to the ideas introduced above, such a debate could address the following questions:

1. Does simultaneous interpreting mean creation or re-creation?
2. Are all instances of simultaneous interpreting creative? If not, which are not?
3. What factors trigger creativity in SI: a speaker anxious to impress who tells jokes or uses sophisticated terms? Certain subject matter? Or even a tendency on the part of some
practitioners to freely associate ideas and play with words?
4. What skills or abilities would you consider relevant to creativity in SI?
5. What conditions or situations (interpreting without a text or preparation, interpreting with a
   written text but without preparation, interpreting with a prepared text, etc.) provide the most
   fertile ground for creative interpreting solutions?
6. Should interpreter training programs take into account the need for creative thinking?

I believe that clarifying the notion of creativity in SI could help interpreters – and others -
better understand that what they are doing is valuable and in some way novel. It might also provide
further arguments in the constant struggle to obtain preparatory materials. Interpreters must be able
to convince clients that interpreting is about more than words and that they need background
information to actively listen, anticipate and create a new product - the target version of the source
message. Such subject knowledge is the cement that holds the building blocks together.

Further examination of this compelling area might also help throw some light on an idea I once
heard expressed by an Austrian colleague - namely that in itself interpreting is not creative, but to
become a good interpreter it helps to be a creative person.

Marzena Drabek is a PhD student at the Institute of Translation and Interpreting of the University
of Vienna.

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