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User Interventions in interpreting and Trust as a Social Notion

Ilda Themeli

University of Tirana, Albania

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Abstract

Interpreting constitutes a social activity in which users of interpreting—speakers and listeners—communicate with one another through the interpreter. In line with sociological approaches within Interpreting Studies, understanding the significance of the relationships between the interpreter and the participants in the communicative event is essential. Accordingly, this article examines user interventions in the interpreting process, first from the perspective of trust in the interpreter. It then considers user interventions through the lens of the interpreter's visibility and invisibility. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with professional interpreters of political discourse in Albania, the article analyses interpreters' experiences of user interventions in both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting settings.

Keywords: interpreting, trust, interpreter's (in)visibility, user interventions.

1. Introduction

Interpreting, as a form of translational activity, differs from translation by virtue of its immediate character. In *The Interpreting Studies Reader*, Pöchhacker defines interpreting as "a form of translation in which a first and final rendition in another language is produced on the basis of a one-time presentation of an utterance in a source language" (Pöchhacker, 2022, p. 11). The need for interpreting arises in situations in which the parties involved in communication do not share a common language, possess insufficient knowledge of one another's language, or deliberately choose not to use a shared language. In such cases, communication between the parties is mediated by an interpreter.

The users of interpreting are the parties directly involved in the communicative process—namely, speakers and listeners. Interpreting therefore constitutes, *par excellence*, a professional activity carried out within a social context.

Since the 1990s, interpreting has increasingly been examined from a sociological perspective, with sociology understood as the discipline concerned with the study

of human social behaviour and institutions (Inghilleri, 2015, p. 388). Sociological approaches contribute to an understanding of the relationships between interpreters and the social and institutional structures within which they operate and to which they provide services (Inghilleri, 2015).

Within this framework, the present article examines the issue of user intervention in political interpreting in Albania. The term *intervention* refers to verbal references made by users (speakers and listeners) concerning the interpreting itself. These include comments or remarks made before, during, or after an interpreted segment, as well as at the conclusion of an interpreting event as a whole.

The aim of the article is to identify the types of interventions encountered by interpreters in the practice of conference interpreting, with a particular focus on consecutive interpreting of political discourse in Albania. Top of Form

1.1 Identification of Interviewees

To identify the types of user intervention in political interpreting, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional interpreters who have Albanian as an active working language. From a methodological perspective, the interviews are primarily exploratory in nature. As Silverman notes, interviews allow researchers to explore several types of knowledge, including, among others, “(ii) interviewee beliefs about the topic of the interview; ... (iv) interviewee perceptions about actions or behaviors; (v) interviewee recounts of present or past behavior; ... (vi) conscious reasons for responses to knowledge types i–v” (Silverman, 2006, as cited in Hale & Napier, 2016, p. 100).

Given the nature of the research instrument employed, as well as the limited number of professional interpreters of political discourse in Albania, the data collected, the analysis conducted, and the conclusions drawn are qualitative rather than quantitative in character.

The small number of professional interpreters working in political discourse in Albania is attributable to several objective factors. These include the status of Albanian as a language with a relatively small number of users, the limited international scope of Albanian politics, and the consequently restricted use of Albanian as a language of political communication in interactions with foreign political actors. As a result, practical demand dictates a relatively small pool of interpreters working with the language combination Albanian (A)–foreign language (B).

In Albania, no official data exist regarding the number of professional conference interpreters. The only official document identifying translators and interpreters is the list of sworn translators maintained by the Ministry of Justice. However, this list cannot serve as a reliable basis for the present study for two reasons. First, Law No. 82/2021, *On Official Translation and the Profession of the Sworn Translator*, and the corresponding register do not distinguish between translators and interpreters. Second, the scope of this legislation does not extend to political interpreting, which is primarily classified as conference interpreting (Pöschhacker, 2013, as cited in Diriker, 2015, p. 78). Instead, the law regulates other forms of interpreting—namely legal and

community interpreting—which are commonly categorised as subtypes of dialogue interpreting (Merlini, 2020, p. 147).

Furthermore, Albania lacks a professional association of conference interpreters whose membership could serve as a reference point for defining the population represented by the selected sample. There are also no prior scholarly initiatives of a comparable nature. Under these circumstances, the identification of potential interviewees and the determination of the sample size relied on the author's professional knowledge of the community of interpreters engaged in political interpreting. This knowledge derives from 24 years of professional experience as a German-language interpreter, including extensive involvement in political interpreting.

For the selection of interview participants, two criteria were established: a minimum of five years of professional experience in political interpreting and Albanian as one of the interpreter's working languages.

1.2 Profile of the Interpreters Interviewed

For the purposes of this study, nine interpreters were contacted, seven of whom agreed to participate in the interviews. All participants have Albanian as their A language and German, English, or Italian as their B language(s). The interpreters interviewed have between 21 and 32 years of professional experience as conference interpreters.

With regard to the proportion of political interpreting in their overall workload, four interpreters reported that political interpreting accounts for the vast majority of their working days, ranging from 80% to 100%. The remaining three interpreters indicated that political interpreting represents between 5% and 20% of their total workload. Two of the interviewees are employed by foreign institutions operating in Albania, while the others work as freelance interpreters.

Four of the interpreters interviewed for this study have successfully passed the institutional testing of the Directorate-General for Interpretation and have been accredited as interpreters for the institutions of the European Union. Accreditation by EU institutions may be regarded as a seal or filter of quality, not only because of the high professional standards applied, but also because only approximately 20% of candidates admitted to the tests pass them successfully (Prokesch-Predanovic & Reithofer-Winter, 2016, p. 230).

Two additional interpreters are officially recognised by the foreign institutions for which they work; these institutions do not apply a formal accreditation scheme comparable to that of the European Union. Two of the interpreters are also recognised by the Council of Europe, which, unlike the EU, does not operate a formal accreditation process but recruits interpreters on the basis of ad hoc calls following the submission of a curriculum vitae documenting professional experience.

The interviewees' workload in political interpreting includes both simultaneous and consecutive interpreting assignments.

1.3 Classification of Interventions in the Interpreting Process

The classification of interventions in the interpreting process referred to in the interviews conducted for this study is based on the typology proposed by

Bartłomiejczyk (2017). In her analysis of interpreter visibility and evaluation in the European Parliament, Bartłomiejczyk examined an extensive interpreting corpus comprising recordings of original speeches, interpreted speeches, and verbatim reports of plenary sessions held between 2005 and 2012 (Bartłomiejczyk, 2017, pp. 166–167). On this basis, she classified references to interpreting as follows:

- requests to slow down the speech rate (made by the chair of the session);
- criticism;
- praise;
- advance warnings of potential difficulties for interpreters;
- apologies; and
- expressions of doubt.

Drawing on this classification and on the interview, data concerning user interventions, five types of references were identified that the interviewed interpreters encounter in their professional practice:

- expressions of thanks;
- advance warnings about difficult passages;
- expressions of doubt;
- criticism;
- corrections made by users.

The final category — corrections — should not be understood as objective improvements or clarifications of the content conveyed by the interpreter, which would require a systematic comparison between the source-language discourse and the target-language rendition. Rather, it refers to interventions made by users who, from their own perspective, act on the assumption that the interpreting was inaccurate or incomplete. The literature in Interpreting Studies cautions against uncritical acceptance of user assessments of accuracy and completeness, emphasizing that such evaluations must take into account users' levels of comprehension of the source or target discourse, which is closely linked to their linguistic competence (Pradas Macías & Zwischenberger, 2022, p. 246).

In contrast to Bartłomiejczyk's typology, the present article treats corrections as a distinct analytical category. This decision is grounded in the examples provided by the interviewed interpreters, particularly in relation to consecutive interpreting. Due to the alternating structure of speaker discourse and interpreter output in consecutive interpreting, users are afforded greater opportunities "to assess the quality (especially fidelity and completeness)" of the interpretation than in simultaneous interpreting settings (Bartłomiejczyk, 2017, p. 173).

2. Analysis

From our perspective, user interventions in the interpreting process are linked to two key elements of social interaction between users and the interpreter in any communicative situation: trust and the interpreter's visibility–invisibility, an organic dichotomy inherent in the interpreter's role.

2.1 Trust

We argue that user interventions indirectly attest to trust as an element shaping attitudes toward both the profession and the figure of the conference interpreter. As Tipton (2015) notes, “trust, and the related concept of trustworthiness, may be understood as a belief that a person or organisation will act in a particular way ... and as a means of making social cooperation easier and even possible” (p. 426). In the context of interpreting, a distinction is commonly drawn between trust in the profession as an abstract concept and trust in interpreting as a concrete activity (Tipton, 2015).

By virtue of the circumstances that necessitate interpreting, it may be argued that for communication and social interaction to function at all, the parties involved are compelled to place their trust in the interpreter. More specifically, they must trust that the interpreter possesses the requisite competence to convey messages accurately and completely, acts impartially toward both parties and their utterances, and adheres to professional standards of confidentiality.

In principle, in the case of professional interpreters, this form of trust may be described as “impersonal trust” (Martínez-Gómez, 2015, p. 425). Such trust does not arise from personal acquaintance or an individual relationship between the interpreter and the parties, but rather from the recognition and acceptance of the interpreter’s professional identity and affiliation. At the same time, because interpreters invariably operate between two parties, “ethical issues can crucially arise for interpreters from the behavior and disposition of either party, and trust has to be obtained from both” (Ozolins, 2015, p. 319).

Trust—or the absence thereof—thus constitutes a fundamental element of the dynamics of social interaction inherent in interpreting and in the interpreter’s professional activity. Notably, evaluations of interpreters are often ambivalent: interpreters are perceived both as “objects of necessary trust” (Tipton, 2015, p. 426) and as figures subject to “deep suspicion” (Tipton, 2015, p. 426). Reflecting on the status of the profession in the Albanian context of political discourse, Interpreter D articulates this ambivalence by characterising the interpreter as “a necessary evil—undesirable, yet necessary, tedious ... something needed for others, not for the politicians themselves.”

2.2 Interpreter (In)visibility

From a theoretical perspective, references to interpreting can also be examined through the lens of the interpreter’s visibility and invisibility. In Translation and Interpreting Studies, the concept of invisibility has been used with different meanings. In translation, as conceptualised by Venuti (1995), invisibility is associated with a preference for fluency in the target language and the domestication of texts (Angelelli, 2015, p. 214). In interpreting, by contrast, invisibility denotes “the alleged lack of agency or power of interpreters” (Angelelli, 2015, p. 214).

From a narrowly deontological perspective, the interpreter’s role has often been

described as that of a conduit who should “reproduce a message ... faithfully [and] accurately ... without changing the message’s intent ... while maintaining a stance of impartiality” (Roy, 2002, p. 347). Within this conception, the interpreter should ideally leave no trace in the product of their work. This view has traditionally been closely linked to the notion of interpreter invisibility, which has constituted a core professional principle in codes of ethics for conference interpreters (Angelelli, 2015; Horváth & Tryuk, 2022).

From a sociological perspective, Wadensjö (2018) refers to the interpreter as a “non-person” (p. 186), drawing on Goffman’s typology of social roles. Goffman (1990) describes “non-persons” as individuals who are present during interaction but “do not take the role either of performer or of audience” (p. 150, as cited in Wadensjö, 2018). However, developments in Translation and Interpreting Studies since the early 2000s have increasingly challenged the notion of interpreter invisibility, which is now often viewed as a myth rather than an empirical reality. Accordingly, “the interpreter is increasingly seen as a human being and not purely a non-person, or a more- or less invisible instrument” (Horváth & Tryuk, 2022, p. 292).

Interpreter visibility is also closely related to the social context of interaction and the type of interpreting involved. In general, interpreters tend to be more visible in community interpreting, whereas conference interpreting traditionally presupposes a higher degree of invisibility (Bartłomiejczyk, 2018, p. 164). Mode of interpreting further shapes this dynamic: in consecutive interpreting, interpreters are more visible in a literal sense due to their physical proximity to users, whereas in simultaneous interpreting “the frames of booths clearly demarcate the social geography of the setting” (Horváth & Tryuk, 2022, p. 292).

Users of conference interpreting themselves tend to prefer “the ghost-role of the interpreter” (Kopczyński, 1994, p. 195), although this preference is reportedly stronger among listeners than among speakers. Within the framework of social interaction, it may therefore be argued that users expect conference interpreters to remain invisible, while interpreters themselves actively seek to minimise their visibility in relation to the parties, their messages, and the communicative event.

As Gile (2009) observes, interpreters may step out of their role as the speaker’s alter ego when they need to inform listeners of a technical problem or when, in their professional judgement, an important piece of information has been omitted (p. 209). Nonetheless, the interpreter “tends to have practically no interaction with the speaker during an interpretation” (Bartłomiejczyk, 2017, p. 162). Consequently, direct references to interpreting and user interventions during the communicative event disrupt the expected state of invisibility and, by extension, render the interpreter visible.

3. Results

In what follows, we present a summary of the findings concerning user interventions of types 1 to 5, as outlined above: (1) expressions of thanks, (2) advance warnings

about difficult passages, (3) expressions of doubt, (4) criticism, and (5) corrections made by users. Of the seven interpreters interviewed, only one reported not having experienced interventions of types 2, 3, 4, or 5 in the context of political interpreting, noting instead that speakers occasionally express appreciation or gratitude at the conclusion of a meeting.

3.1 Appreciation and Announcing of Difficulties

Expressions of appreciation (Type 1) are mentioned in only two of the seven interviews conducted. The second type of intervention—advance warnings about difficult passages—is likewise reported in only two interviews. Interpreter A refers to instances in which speakers, in the course of their discourse and sometimes immediately before using phraseological expressions, insert comments directly addressed to the interpreter, such as “I don’t know how you’ll say this in Albanian.” As Bartłomiejczyk (2017) observes, “the items that are felt to be difficult by speakers indeed prove problematic—e.g. quotations, colorful idioms, proverbs, [and] jokes” (p. 178).

Similarly, when referring to situations in which speakers anticipate the use of idiomatic expressions or proverbs, Interpreter E notes that such anticipatory comments add to the interpreter’s usual cognitive load rather than alleviating it.

3.2 Expressions of Doubt, Criticism, and Correction

Interventions of Type 3 (expressions of doubt), Type 4 (criticism), and Type 5 (corrections) can be subsumed under a common analytical denominator. Specifically, they pose a risk to the interpreter’s credibility and may result in a “loss of face” as a constituent element of social interaction; for this reason, they are discussed jointly here. The contributions of two of the seven interviews concerning interventions cannot be clearly classified within the typology defined above. Nevertheless, given their content, they clearly do not constitute expressions of appreciation or advance warnings of difficult passages but rather relate more closely to expressions of doubt or criticism concerning the accuracy or completeness of the interpreting.

By way of illustration, we present several accounts provided by Interpreter E relating to phraseological expressions and speaker interventions. Interpreter E describes a specific instance in which a speaker used the Albanian idiom *U mbars mali dhe polli një mi*, which the interpreter rendered into target language Y as *Much ado about nothing*. At the end of the interpreted segment, the speaker interrupted the interaction with the interlocutor and addressed the interpreter, stating: “I really don’t speak [the language], but I didn’t hear the word ‘mountain’ anywhere.”

This example may be classified not only as an expression of doubt but also as implicit criticism of the interpreting. In both cases, the communicative function of skepticism or criticism is not articulated explicitly but embedded in the subtext. The wording used by the speaker suggests a certain degree of familiarity with the foreign language; consequently, unlike the cases discussed below, the boundary between doubt and criticism is not sharply delineated.

The following example, drawn from personal interpreting experience, can be more clearly classified as an expression of doubt. During a meeting involving consecutive interpreting, an Albanian politician used the idiomatic expression *Shumë mami e nxjerrin fëmijën çyryk*, which was rendered into German using the equivalent *Viele Köche verderben den Brei*. As in the experience reported by Interpreter E, the speaker—who did not have knowledge of German—interrupted the interaction and addressed the interpreter with the question: “How did you interpret it into German?”

In response, we briefly explained that the meaning conveyed by the Albanian idiom is expressed in German through the equivalent used, adding its literal translation into Albanian. In addition, in accordance with the ethical principle of transparency in interpreting, it was necessary to provide a brief explanation to the German-speaking interlocutors regarding the reason for the interpreter’s direct communication with the Albanian speaker.

In contrast to the cases discussed above, two of the interviewed interpreters, when referring to simultaneous interpreting, report encountering formulations such as “I don’t know how the interpreter translated it,” “I don’t know how I am being interpreted,” or “If I understood the interpretation correctly.” These formulations, reported in a generalised form, are detached from a specific communicative and interactional context.

The aim here is not to determine whether such insertions into discourse are made with or without legitimate grounds for doubting the accuracy or completeness of the interpreting—an issue that would merit closer empirical analysis. Such an analysis would require access to both the original speech and the interpreter’s rendition, as well as consideration of factors such as speech rate, syntactic and informational density, prior access to the speech text, and a pragmatic analysis of the immediate communicative context.

This last aspect is of particular relevance, as interlocutors may employ communicative strategies designed “...not to put one’s view bluntly, and not to sound too abrupt or quarrelsome” (Wierzbicka, 2003, p. 43). In monolingual interaction, this effect may be achieved through formulations such as “if I understood you correctly”; in interpreter-mediated communication, a comparable mitigating function may be served by expressions such as “if the interpretation was correct” (Bartłomiejczyk, 2017, p. 180; see also Diriker, 2004, p. 137).

Even when analysed at face value and outside their full interactional context, such interventions may reasonably be interpreted as expressions of doubt directed toward the interpreter. As such, they not only render the interpreter visible but may also place the interpreter in an unfavourable position insofar as they risk undermining the foundation of trust that the parties place in the interpreting process and in the interpreter.

When such interventions arise for ostensibly objective reasons related to the content of the target discourse—namely its perceived accuracy or completeness—users tend to attribute them directly to the interpreter’s linguistic and translational competence. In doing so, they may overlook other contributing factors, such as poor acoustics,

unclear pronunciation on the part of the speaker, excessive speech rate, or similar external constraints.

In practice, the interpreter's possibilities for clarifying or refuting expressions of doubt or implicit criticism during the interpreting process are limited. These possibilities depend on a range of factors, including the institutional level of the meeting, the status of the interlocutors, the mode of interpreting, and the relevance of clarification to maintaining the smooth flow of communication without disrupting the interaction between the parties. Interpreter D captures this dilemma as follows:

"If it happens that the other person starts to score points—because they are also scoring points themselves—then you have to avoid, by all possible means, continuing to score points as well. It solves nothing. You would put yourself on a podium more than you should, and that is not in your interest. It is also a pragmatic issue. Why should I be interested in debating? It is not in my interest at all. Do I feel an inner urge to debate? Of course, I do—especially when I think that I am right, professionally speaking."

The accounts provided by three of the interviewed interpreters include instances of user interventions in the form of corrections to the interpreting. Selected examples are presented below.

Example 1

Original utterance: *Mos harro gjërat e tua!*

Interpreting: "You have to take all your belongings!"

Speaker's intervention: "No, that's not what I said; I said 'don't forget!'"

Example 2

Speaker: *Komisionin e kemi krijuar me gjysëm, gjysëm.*

(Context: Half of the members are from the opposition and half from the governing party.)

Interpreting into language Y (rendered in Albanian during the interview):

"The composition of the commission is fifty-fifty."

Intervention: "No, half and half."

Example 3

Speaker: *E kemi bërë me kodin penal.*

Interpreting: "...criminal code."

Intervention: "No, with the penal code."

As can be observed, in these examples what the speakers present as corrections are not, in fact, corrections, as the content conveyed is accurate and complete at both the communicative and linguistic levels. A plausible explanation for interventions of this nature lies in users' expectations regarding what they perceive as faithful, accurate, and complete interpreting. These expectations are often shaped by the belief that interpreting should be literal, with a close lexical correspondence between source and target utterances.

The fourth example reported by the interviewees does not involve a correction but rather explicit criticism from a user, who stated: "The interpreter put it that way, but said it incorrectly, because that doesn't exist in the other language."

All examples involve interventions occurring during consecutive interpreting. In Examples 2 and 4, the interpreters report having intervened by addressing the audience listening to the interpretation in order to explain the content of the intervention. In Example 1, the interpreter does not specify whether any response was made to the purported correction. In Example 3, by contrast, the interpreter reports having addressed the speaker directly, pointing out that the correct term was the one used by the interpreter.

4. Conclusion

In summary, user interventions in the interpreting process produce several notable effects. First, they interrupt the normal flow of communication between the parties, who ordinarily address their messages to one another rather than to the interpreter. Second, whether justified or not, such interventions remove the interpreter from a position of invisibility. Third, depending on the circumstances, the interpreter may choose to act within the communicative event not merely as the speaker's alter ego, but as an autonomous individual—either to explain the content of their direct communication to the other party in the interest of transparency or, in some cases, to defend their professional performance (Diriker, 2004, pp. 140–141).

Fourth, interventions that express doubt, criticism, or contain corrections (as perceived by users) may negatively affect the parties' trust in the interpreter's professional competence. The objective identification of errors or information loss in interpreting that may underlie such interventions requires a comprehensive analysis of the communicative situation, combined with a comparison of source and target discourse, as noted above. In practice, however, user evaluations tend to be based on criteria that differ from those applied within professional circles, which emphasise "the relationship between external factors, processing conditions and source and target discourse" (Kalina, 2015, p. 31).

From our perspective, user interventions during the interpreting process affect not only the invisibility–visibility dichotomy of the interpreter's role. Interventions in the form of expressions of doubt, corrections, and criticism should also be examined through the lens of trust in the profession of conference interpreting and in the interpreter's professional identity. Given that all interviewed interpreters who report interventions of this kind attribute them to Albanian users, this phenomenon may also be indicative of the broader professional climate and working conditions under which conference interpreting is practiced in the Albanian context.

From a research perspective, it would be valuable to examine more closely interpreter behaviour in such face-threatening situations, including:

- the circumstances under which interpreters choose to intervene directly in order to provide clarifications they deem necessary;
- when and why they choose to defend themselves;
- whether they choose to interpret user interventions or not; and
- if they do interpret them, how they signal to listeners that they are speaking in an

individual capacity rather than acting as interpreters.

Further research could also explore whether, and how, interpreters' decisions to take a stance—or to refrain from doing so—in response to unfounded expressions of doubt, criticism, or correction are related to their individual professional self-positioning in interaction with situational and institutional factors.

Such in-depth inquiry could contribute to the development of practically oriented guidelines for practitioners, aimed at supporting effective social interaction with users of interpreting and strengthening trust in the interpreter's professional role.

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