

The Role of Message Analysis in Interpretation¹

William P. Isham

Introduction

In recent years, the field of interpreting has been inundated with new information, much of it based on linguistic research. As more information came to me about American Sign Language and the process of interpreting, the possibility of my ever having the necessary skills to interpret seemed further and further away.

The first inkling I had of help in a practical form was in a class taught by Betty M. Colonomos,² who discussed analyzing passages for various characteristics. This I could do, and as I came to understand what each passage meant more deeply, I found that I suddenly had more options. My range of possible ways to produce that passage in another language had grown. From this, I discovered that one obstacle to my own growth as an interpreter had been my lack of listening skills. I had been listening to the words and not the meaning.

I set out to teach myself how to listen properly. What resulted over time is an evolving structure which I extracted from the work of others in areas such as discourse and text analysis, and from discussions with other interpreters. I then assembled this information into a form which suited my needs as an interpreter. I am presently calling this approach to listening "Message Analysis."

Message Analysis is an attempt not only to make theory usable, but also to some extent, to de-mystify this skill we call interpreting. Although at first glance the following information may appear to be more theory, I would like to emphasize that message analysis is a skill. It is practicable. With time and effort, one can improve in it.

Enough of the preliminaries; let's begin.

The search for equivalence

Seleskovitch (1978) presents a strong case against word-for-word translation as an appropriate model for interpretation. Without taking up that discussion here, this paper is based on an equally strong belief in the same principle. The interpreter's task, then, is not the search for the same words in another language, but, in Seleskovitch's own terms, the "search for

equivalents in two different languages" (p. 84).

Acceptance of this philosophical stand leaves the question, "If not words, equivalents of what?" Message analysis is an attempt to answer this question. In this paper, I present six parameters as initial suggestions of "what to search for," along with a sample text to demonstrate what is meant by each parameter. This will be followed by a general discussion of some techniques for applying message analysis while "on the job."

There are three stages to successfully relaying an equivalent interpretation: identifying what needs to be relayed; searching for equivalents in the target language; and finally, producing them. The search for and production of equivalent interpretations will not be discussed here. The first stage -- identifying -- is the focus of this paper.

A particular utterance (also to be called a "text") in any given time and place conveys many different things simultaneously. A text can be likened to a many-sided crystal. Each face represents only one part of what a speaker expresses the moment the phrase or sentence is uttered, and taken alone, does not have much meaning. Only by seeing the entire crystal do we fully understand the speaker³; this sum of many parts shall be called the "message."

Comprehending another's message is routine for us; we do it without thinking. We are generally unaware that what we understand is actually composed of different parts. As interpreters, we must learn to dissect something most of us never realized was divisible.

Six "faces" of the crystal are important to our task: content, function, register, affect, contextual force, and metanotative qualities. These six parameters are generally useful in analyzing language for a number of purposes. Although there are others, these six are most directly related to the interpreter's task.

Aside from these parameters, there is another aspect -- called "context" -- which is necessary to understanding any message. Context is not included in the list above, for one must apply the notion of context to each of the parameters. One might say that the context is the pair of glasses one needs to see any part of a message. Therefore, context is our first topic.

Context

Understanding another's message when it is not intended for us is not an easy task. This is because we lack the background information a typical listener would possess. We operate at a

disadvantage. Although the kinds of situations where interpreting occurs are those where the speaker and the listener do not know each other intimately, we still are left with a lot of guesswork about our consumers and their relationship to each other. Context is the tool we use to fill in the gaps.

Understanding occurs largely from having background information and prior experience to draw upon. All of us have experienced enjoying a private joke with someone which depends on an experience shared between ourselves and our listener. A third party who does not have that past knowledge will not understand the joke, and will remain unmoved should someone try to explain it. Background information cannot be artificially forced into the present tense. Intuitively we know this to be true, and so when asked for an explanation of our laughter, we will simply say, "You had to be there."

Understanding any utterance one hears is very much like that private joke: there is always some amount of background information required to fully understand the speaker's intention. This background knowledge is called the "situation" by Germain (1979). He defines it as: "...the set of facts known by the speaker and the listener at the moment the speech act occurs." This would include the relationship between the speaker and the listener (i.e., father and son, teacher and student, best of friends, etc.), everything they know about each other's lives, and even everything they know about the world around them: their view of reality itself.⁴

Given enough time, some inferences about the situational context can be made from the discourse itself. Thus, as we join two people in the middle of a conversation, not only can we deduce the topic under discussion, but we can make educated guesses about the relationship of the two people talking. Without knowing anything else about them it is easy to imagine ourselves knowing whether they are family, close friends, or merely acquaintances.

As interpreters, we must listen consciously for these clues we use so automatically everyday. This information provides enormous insight into each speaker's message, and is necessary for analyzing the other parameters. Not only must we listen for situational context to provide us with clues about the message, we must then use the message to help fill out our understanding of the situation. A cycle is formed. Understanding a little of how these people see the world and each other helps us to understand their discourse. The more we understand their discourse, the more we can understand their relationship and the way they view the world.

With this as preparation, we can move to the first parameter, content.

Content

"Content" refers to the facts, ideas, information and other objective material expressed in an utterance. In the sentence, "Tom has a brown four door," the content relates information about a specific car, its color, and who owns it.

At first glance, content seems to be an easy parameter to handle. It is more difficult than it appears. Listening for content involves many pitfalls, and because understanding seems to come so easily, we may not pay as much attention or give enough energy to analyzing content. From mere habit, we depend too much on the words. The first skill interpreters must master, then, involves breaking an old and trusted habit: we must learn to listen for ideas and not words.

Propositions

A proposition is an idea, thought, or any objectively expressed concept within the discourse. A sentence may include several propositions. Returning for a moment to the first example used in this section, the difference between a sentence and a proposition can be clarified. "Tom has a brown four door," is one sentence, made up of six words and four propositions:

- 1) there is a car
- 2) the car is brown
- 3) the car has four doors
- 4) the car is owned by somebody named Tom.

Note that the first proposition is not overtly stated, but is implied by the other three.

Paying attention to four propositions instead of one sentence seems to make matters more complicated and not less. In everyday conversation, of course, we hear these four propositions as one unit. Interpreters should do the same, and listen for manageable groups of propositions. Although it may appear we have returned to the sentence level, in fact we have not. Van Dijk (1972) separates the two by saying that propositions represent facts, and sentences express propositions.

The difference between propositions and sentences is important. A certain set of propositions may be expressed in one sentence in Language A, and require two sentences in Language B. For example, take this sentence: "The man was exhausted after John made him run around the football field." In ASL, these propositions are best handled with at least two and probably three sentences. First, one would depict the man running around the field, and in the second sentence, relate how he was compelled to do so by John. Last, the fact that this left him exhausted could be conveyed. Of course there are

other possibilities for combining these propositions.

Likewise, there are many samples of ASL sentences which would require two or more separate sentences in English. For these reasons, we should not restrict ourselves to interpreting messages one sentence at a time. Interpreters will help themselves by listening for propositions.

The sample:

After the discussion for each parameter, the following text will be analyzed as an example:

Ladies, ladies...please. My mother always taught me not only that I have a right to disagree, but that I should always be polite when doing so.

Although ideally a spoken text should be heard, it is hoped that we can glean enough from this written version to make the example worthwhile.

First, let us look at the context. The utterance was delivered by Geraldine Ferraro during a campaign speech. She was addressing a fairly large crowd outdoors from a stage. From the beginning of her address, she received loud protest from a group of middle-aged and middle-class women, who were supporters of the pro-life stance on the abortion controversy. At first, their loud protests were gauged to force Ms. Ferraro into discussing the issue, but in time, they resorted to insults about the candidate's personal life. Finally, after trying to ignore their derision, Ms. Ferraro, in a tight but controlled voice, made the utterance we are using as the sample text.

Now having both the utterance and its context, we can look at its content. After getting their attention with "Ladies, ladies...please," Ms. Ferraro presented the following propositions:

- 1) I have the right to disagree
- 2) My mother taught me so
- 3) I should be polite
- 4) My mother taught me so
- 5) I should especially be polite when disagreeing
- 6) My mother taught me that, too.

This is the denotative meaning: the objective, external information. The subjective meaning experienced by the listeners, called connotative, is quite different. Connotatively, other propositions are inferred:

- 1) Your mothers taught you the same thing
- 2) Therefore, you should be polite
- 3) I am being polite to you now, proving my mother taught me well
- 4) You are not being polite
- 5) Therefore, your mothers did not teach you well.

Notice that Ms. Ferraro used the term "Ladies" to gain quiet and to attract their attention. By using a term which, to an older generation, connotes gentility and good upbringing, she is foreshadowing the theme of the message to come.

Function

Every time we say something, there is a general purpose behind our words. We intend to accomplish something. Whether it be to entertain, to inform, or to persuade, we communicate because we have a desired result. These purposes, the very reasons we speak at all, are called the functions of the message.

The function of the message greatly influences how something is expressed. If the aim is to convince another that our opinion is correct, certain features are likely to appear in our speech and gesture. We might raise our voices to a higher volume than is necessary for our listener to hear us, or we might stress certain key words, and various hand movements might be incorporated to add emphasis to our conviction.

It is for this reason that Cokely (1983c) stresses the importance of understanding "communicative functions" for students of interpreting. Indeed, any interpreter who works at understanding the function behind the words of the speaker has a great advantage. When interpreters can make their purpose the same as the speaker's, then the choices in delivery will be naturally shaped by that common goal.

The sample:

Ms. Ferraro clearly had one function in mind: to stop the distraction created by the group of protesting women. Her purpose was achieved indirectly, for by making these women look at their own behavior, Ms. Ferraro hoped that they would make their own decision to stop their heckling. A more direct command to "be quiet," no matter how politely put, may have backfired.

In many cases, the speaker's function can be found by asking the simple question, "Why did s/he speak in the first place?" If Ms. Ferraro hadn't needed to stop a verbal onslaught, she wouldn't have addressed the women at all. Any interpretation

which expressed Ms. Ferraro's idea but failed to quiet an unruly audience could not be called equivalent.

Register

There are an infinite number of ways to express an idea in any language. In fact, it is impossible to say the same thing exactly the same way twice. We can vary the way an idea is expressed through vocabulary choice, syntax, intonation, facial expression, gesture and the like.

Each of these ways of varying expression can be analyzed for the relative effect it may have on the communication. For our purpose as interpreters, however, we are more concerned with the effects which result from variations of several of these components simultaneously. These variations in the surface structure have been called "linguistic style levels" (Joos, 1967; Cokely, 1983b), and are also commonly referred to as "registers."

One speaks differently when addressing a parent, a close friend, or a teacher. These differences reflect our relationship to the person we are addressing, and the situation we find ourselves in. Cokely describes this phenomena as "social distance":

The particular linguistic style that a person chooses to use is a communicative strategy for creating or maintaining social distance or proximity. That is, since people do not feel equally close to everyone that they communicate with, the style level that a person uses is one indication of the degree of familiarity that s/he feels or wishes to establish.

(Cokely, 1983b, p. 4)

In this same article, Cokely provides clear and succinct explanations of the five registers: frozen, formal, consultative, informal, and intimate. (See Cokely, 1983b, for a detailed description.)

The sample:

One excellent illustration of register is to hear the same propositions expressed through language characteristic of different registers. Again, we must make do with a written form and hope that still the point is made. Here is the Ferraro text in three of them: the original in its consultative (or neutral) register, followed by examples of the same propositions rendered first more formally, and then more informally.

Consultative Register

Ladies, ladies...please. My mother always taught me not only that I have a right to disagree, but that I should always be polite when doing so.

Formal Register

Excuse me, ladies. My mother not only taught me to stand up for my convictions, she also counseled politeness towards those whose beliefs differed from my own.

Informal Register

Hey...hey. Ya know, my mother taught me that it's okay not to agree but the least I could do is be nice about it.

Part of the interpreter's responsibility is to produce an utterance in the target language using the same register. Failing this risks misunderstandings, such as when a listener might think the speaker rude because the interpreter delivered the message too informally. We are not only responsible for the propositions of the message, we are also responsible for how they are expressed.

Changing the register is one way the delivery of a message may change. Altering the affect is another.

Affect

Affect is the emotion and tone conveyed in the text. Affect is perceived by listeners through volume, stress patterns, vocabulary choices and other linguistic and paralinguistic clues given by the speaker.

Affect is nothing new to the field of interpreting. Most of us have received feedback regarding our attempts to relate the affect of the speaker. All too often, however, volume and pitch are the only tools employed to show emotion. Thus, louder speech and changes in intonation are the vehicles which clue our audience in to the fact that the speaker, for example, is angry.

Strong emotion, or lack of it, influences much more than these more obvious indications. Vocabulary choice and syntax may be affected, to varying results and degrees. For example, anger may produce greater eloquence in some, and speechlessness in others. Intense emotion will alter the rate of speech, too, or create new rhythms with the pauses that can

come from such things as the hesitancy to express oneself while experiencing deep emotion.

As interpreters, we need not only to be aware that it is our responsibility to convey affect, but to be consciously aware of how this is accomplished in any of the languages we are working with. Knowing how elation is expressed in the source language does not guarantee that these same strategies can be used in the target language. Finding equivalence in affect does not necessarily mean imitating the delivery of the speaker.

Knowing how to express tone and emotion in a second language is one of the more difficult tasks we must face. One can begin by heightening awareness of the effects of emotion on our native language, and then looking for similarities or differences while conversing in the second language. Mastering this skill will be a matter of time and effort.

The sample:

This is the most difficult of the parameters to discuss without the benefit of hearing the utterance itself. In fact, without hearing Ms. Ferraro's voice and seeing her gestures, facial expressions or postures, it is impossible to declare anything about her affect one way or another. For the sake of consistency, affect will be addressed, if for nothing more than exercise. The discussion will be restricted, however, to what can be deduced from the context and a little common sense.

Given the situation, her goal in delivering her speech (gaining votes), and the verbal abuse being directed toward her, it is easy to believe that some anger was involved with her utterance. The desire to speak out directly in her own defense was likely in conflict with the need to behave in socially appropriate ways, resulting in frustration. Finally, there may have been some satisfaction found in having expressed such an effective text.

These are just some of the possible emotions which Ms. Ferraro may have experienced and which may have been evident in her intonation, facial expressions and so on. Likewise, they represent just a few of the possible affects any interpreter will need to be able to convey.

Contextual force

Contextual force is the relative impact (low to high) a message has on its receiver. Hirsch (cited by Horton, 1979) calls it "significance" and contrasts it with "meaning." He points out that, depending on the listener, a particular proposition has a relative impact or charge to it. It is either an

emotional topic or it is not; it causes interest or it does not; it stimulates memories of past experiences or it does not.

The utterance meaning, then, is singular and determined by the speaker, while its significance, or contextual force, is multiple in that it changes from listener to listener. Some general claims can be made about social groups, however, that make contextual force more usable for interpreters. When a point about Gertrude Stein is mentioned, for example, the women in the audience will presumably experience a higher contextual force than the men will.

Knowing the context means knowing who our audience is and, in part, what might be important to them. Awareness of the potential impact a message might have to a particular group is important to the interpreter seeking equivalence.

The sample:

The contextual force of Geraldine Ferraro's statement can be assumed to be quite high for everyone who heard it, and especially so for the women to whom it was directed. For the audience in general, many must have been wondering how the candidate would deal with this difficult situation. Some may have been hoping for some kind of retort that would provide an interesting tale at the evening's dinner table. For both of these groups, raised expectations before the utterance contributed to the impact experienced when it finally came.

The high impact the utterance must have had on the group of hecklers is obvious. Ms. Ferraro managed to put down these women, cast doubt on their upbringing, and denigrate their mothers in addition to embarrassing them in front of a large crowd -- all under the guise of a lesson in politeness. It was a verbal coup.

Metanotative qualities

As an audience listens to a speaker, they not only make judgments about what the speaker says, they are simultaneously making judgments about the person who is speaking. Smith (1978) calls this level of meaning for the listener "metanotative," as opposed to denotative and connotative. Cokely (1983a) explains it thus: "Metanotative qualities of messages and speakers are those non-content characteristics that influence or determine a person's overall impressions of the speaker."

Perhaps the most easily grasped definition is one by Colonomos (personal communication) for what she calls the "speaker's style." Given the same context, content, affect, and register, the speaker's style is everything that makes

Speaker A different from Speaker B.

Metanotative qualities of the message are what let us internally answer such questions as "What is the speaker like as an individual? Is he educated or uneducated? Is she friendly? Is she knowledgeable about her topic? Can I trust him?" and so on. Whenever we listen to another, we are forming completely subjective opinions based, in part, on the verbal behavior of the speaker.

As interpreters, our renditions of speaker's messages should reflect their individuality. A dry, monotonous delivery should not be transformed into something interesting by our own cleverness. The target language audience has just as much a right to know that this man is a bore as those who share his language.

The sample:

By definition, each of us must form our own judgments of speakers subjectively, so it would be a contradiction to state what judgments were made of Ms. Ferraro in this paper. Some of the audience who heard her utterance may have decided that Geraldine Ferraro is witty, while others may have been impressed with her control in such a difficult position. Still other listeners may have thought her cowardly for avoiding the pro-life/pro-choice controversy.

If interpreters can reflect enough of a speaker's unique flavor, then the target language audience will make their own subjective judgments, just as they should.

Message analysis in practice

It would appear that interpreters have enough to do without having to consciously analyze each utterance in the light of these six parameters. At first, message analysis appears to be more hindrance than help. Yet, message analysis can be used in at least three separate ways, the first of which can be employed by anyone immediately.

The three uses of message analysis to be discussed in brief here are Critique, Identifying Difficulties, and Prioritizing. Although using message analysis requires some practice, it is not as difficult as one might think.

Critique

Any interpreter may begin practicing message analysis by using it after the fact. By reviewing our performance after an interpreting assignment (perhaps with the help of another), we can use the six parameters to help clarify in our own minds where we were and were not successful. Various aspects of our own performance become clear with questions like these: "Were

the propositions I provided the target audience equal to those by the original speaker? Was my affect equivalent? Was my register the same, or was I too formal?" By reviewing work done using this structure, we should be able to gain insight into our present level of functioning. At the same time, we are simultaneously solidifying our understanding of each parameter.

Likewise, we can offer others feedback of a similar nature. All of us have heard both positive and negative feedback that was too general to be of any practical use ("Your signs were not clear" or "You were wonderful"). Specific input based on identifiable criteria will be refreshing after such well-meaning but useless feedback.

Identifying difficulties

Eventually, as understanding of each parameter is solidified, the next step in using message analysis will most likely take place of its own accord. If your experience is similar to mine, you will not find yourself thinking about each parameter in turn as you are interpreting. Instead, you will suddenly become aware of a particular parameter because it is, at that moment, presenting you with a problem.

That "problem" might be a sudden shift in register that produced laughter in some listeners; or it might be a proposition which presumes context you know your target audience does not have. Whatever the case, the interpreter is suddenly saying to him- or herself: "Oh no. What do I do now?"

This phenomenon of select parameters entering the consciousness of the interpreter while working may imply that, at some level, the brain has in fact analyzed the other parameters and found equivalent phrases in the target language. Whether this is so is an interesting topic for discussion or research. In any case, that this does occur is of tremendous help to the interpreter. It allows us to focus our energy on the "problem," thereby using that energy efficiently. Those few moments that we have between the utterance and our rendition are too precious to be wasted by doing nothing at all, or by trying to accomplish too much. Focusing in on the one or two parameters that are more difficult for a particular text is lag time well used.

Prioritizing

When more than one parameter presents difficulty, it may not be possible to address each of them in the lag time we have provided ourselves. Here, interpreters can prioritize their analysis. There are several possible ways to order the importance of particular parameters for any given text.

First, the interpreter should have some idea of why that

parameter is an issue at the moment. It may be that the roadblock lies in the interpreter: s/he does not know a target language utterance which will incorporate a given parameter. Searching for an equivalent is impossible in a subjective sense. If this is the case, there is no point in putting energy into the matter.

It is not message analysis that is judgmental; we are too hard on ourselves already. There is not an interpreter alive who can find equivalents a hundred per cent of the time, and so we should not waste energy feeling badly when we fail. We could be busy analyzing parameters that we can handle.

There is another case -- when something is not interpretable at all by anyone -- where we should again drop the issue immediately. This time, the search is impossible in an objective sense: there is no equivalent in the target language. When we have decided this is true, we should waste no time in moving on.

By eliminating the impossibilities, we are left with those parameters of a message which are just plain hard to interpret for any number of reasons. We become acutely aware of an utterance which would be equivalent for all parameters except one, and suspect that with a little more time and creativity, we could find just the answer. Hopefully, after eliminating the "impossibles," whether they are subjectively or objectively so, we only have one left to handle. Focusing all of our available energy on this parameter may tilt the scales in our favor.

It may be that even after elimination exercises, several parameters are still left which require individual attention. Here, we have to make a decision as to their rank of importance. One guide which is very often helpful is to consider the function of the message, and to concentrate on whichever parameter will best further the speaker's purpose. To illustrate, in a classroom the day before the final exam, the content of the lecture is of utmost importance. In a campaign speech such as Ms. Ferraro's, where voters are deciding whether or not to trust this potential leader, affect and metanotative qualities become crucial.

We will always be faced with such decisions, and it is certain that all of us will make both good and bad choices during our careers. Nevertheless, knowing what the issues are and then prioritizing our options will help with these difficult but necessary decisions.

Conclusion

Message analysis provides a structure with which we can

understand the speaker's meaning, and thereby search for utterances in the target language which will convey an equivalent message. Consisting of six parameters, each being analyzed in context, message analysis dissects meaning into manageable parts.

Message analysis is a skill. We tend to think of skills as mechanical or physical, but some, like message analysis, are entirely mental: it is learnable and teachable. Practicing message analysis will bring improvement in interpretation. It is suggested that those interested in trying begin by using it to critique themselves after assignments. Eventually, message analysis will begin happening on the job almost of its own accord.

In the search for equivalence, message analysis is the first step. When we become aware of the message as a whole we can hope to interpret the wholeness of the message.

NOTES

1) I would like to express my deep appreciation to both Charlotte Baker-Shenk and Betty M. Colonomos for their suggestions and feedback. Any error in fact or understanding is mine alone.

In addition, I would like to thank the many people who helped by suggesting resources for further investigation, or by either proofreading or critiquing the final draft. (There are too many of you to name here, but hugs are available upon request.)

2) Course title: "ASL to English; English to ASL: Theory and Practice."

3) For convenience in a written paper, all examples will be taken from English. Message analysis, however, is equally applicable to any language, spoken or signed. Terms such as "listener," "speaker," and the like are to be understood generically.

4) The situation, of course, can only be fully understood in terms of the speaker's culture. Culture is of such overwhelming importance that it might be said that this paper avoids a central issue. I agree. No matter where I tried to introduce the role of culture in interpreting in general and its place in message analysis in particular, I was unable to do justice to such a complicated topic in the time and space allotted me.