Escort Interpreters as the Participants of Communication

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Abstract. Escort interpreting, the highly demanded form of interpreting in domestic market, obtains
the least attention in the aspects of academic research, interpreter training and accreditation. In this
paper, the author affirms that escort interpreting is a distinctive profession, reveals the differences
between conference interpreting and escort interpreting and points out the characteristics of escort
interpreting in China. From the perspective of communication, this paper demonstrates that escort
interpreting, in nature, is an act of communication. Escort interpreters are participants of the
communication who work jointly with their clients to achieve the same goal of the communication.
They adopt proper communicative strategies to protect the result of the communication and
sometimes mediate between the interlocutors of different cultural backgrounds. It is suggested by
the author that such characteristics of escort interpreting and escort interpreters should be fully
considered when the escort interpreters are trained and accredited.

Introduction

As China is getting more and more involved in the international economic, political and cultural
activities in recent years, the demand for interpreters is ascending. However, in China, escort
interpreting, as one of the most common forms of interpreting, compared with the relatively
full-fledged conference interpreting, has encountered various problems in terms of the market
standardization, interpreter training and accreditation.

There is a sense that if a person can speak English, he or she is able to do the escort interpreting.
Conference interpreting is regarded as the professional form of interpreting while escort interpreting
only the primary or preparing stage of it. Such ideas are undoubtedly not constructive to build a
regulated and healthy interpreting market. With no qualification threshold to enter the market, the
training and accreditation of interpreting seem worthless.

Under such circumstances, this paper is aimed to research on escort interpreting from the
perspective of communication. The paper will concentrate on: the definition of escort interpreting,
the comparison with other forms of interpreting, the working mode of escort interpreting and the
communicative characteristics of escort interpreting. Moreover, the practical value of this paper
includes the enlightenment on the training and accreditation of escort interpreting.

The Concept of Escort Interpreting

Escort interpreting has some similar names including community interpreting, public service
interpreting, ad hoc interpreting and three-cornered interpreting. And in China, community services
are not as fully developed as those in western countries, thereby the name Escort Interpreting is
more flexible on the different occasions where escort interpreting happens in China.

As escort interpreting is often mixed with conference interpreting and seen as the lower level of it,
there is a must to figure out the difference between the two types.

Conference interpreting is usually applied in the press conference, business meetings,
international seminars, etc. On such occasions, speakers will give speeches to a group of people and
take their questions sometimes. The interpreters will undertake consecutive interpreting or
sometimes simultaneous interpreting sitting or standing next to the speaker or in a booth. While
escort interpreting, particularly in China, often takes place in business visit, travel and reception, conference and fair, or other daily meetings. In escort interpreting, the interpreter is there to provide interpreting services to both two or sometimes more interlocutors. Escort interpreters mostly do consecutive interpreting. They sometimes work on the move, and the turn-taking of the dialogue is often swift, so it is common to see the interpreters work without note-taking.

The differences between conference interpreting and escort interpreting in working mode are mainly as follows:

1. In escort interpreting, interpreters usually have a face to face communication with speakers, while conference interpreters sit next to the speaker or in the booth, facing the audience. Escort interpreters have a closer distance with the speakers.
2. Escort interpreters need to do both-way interpreting while conference interpreting mostly interpret only for the speaker.
3. The content of escort interpreting is more flexible and uncertain. The topics may vary as the conversation goes on. There are fixed topics in conferences and sometimes interpreters are given speech scripts in advance.
4. Escort interpreting is relatively informal compared with conference interpreting.

In this case, escort interpreters, compared with conference interpreters, are more as a part of the conversation instead of an isolated service provider.

**Escort Interpreters: The Participant of Communication**

**Escort interpreting is an act of communication**

In escort interpreting, interlocutors who speak different languages and have different cultural backgrounds talk with each other with the help of the escort interpreters. Such activities take place in the authentic social environments. It is a communicative behavior in nature.

According to Wikipedia, communication originates from the word *commūnicāre*, and is the act of conveying intended meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs and semiotic rules [1]. Communication is also defined as the process of using messages to generate meaning. Communication is considered a process because it is an activity, an exchange, or a set of behaviors [2].

No matter how to define communication, the precondition of communication is the exchange of information. And the exchange is by all means a two-way interaction. In escort interpreting, interlocutors who speak different languages rely on the interpreter to exchange their messages. The positions of the communicators are presented clearly in Seleskovich’s triangular model [3].

![Figure 1. Seleskovich’s Triangular Model.](image-url)

Escort interpreters make the information exchange possible. On the contrary, without the work of escort interpreters, one speaker can still deliver the message, but the other will have difficulties understanding him or her, let alone responding to the message or delivering his or her own message. The exchange does not happen.

Besides, communication is considered a process. A process is dynamic, ongoing and even changing anytime. The topics of communication can be flexible and impromptu. Escort interpreting takes place in a more daily context. Interlocutors speak whatever comes to their minds. The
elements in the environment, and the feedback from the listeners, either verbal or non-verbal, will all influence the development of conversation. This is exactly a feature of communication.

**Escort interpreters are participants of the communication**

According to Grice, an effective communication can be achieved based on the cooperative principle [4], which means listeners and speakers must act cooperatively and mutually to accept one another so that the information can be successfully exchanged. In the conversation, the interlocutors must work together to make the conversation proceed. As for interpreters, their function is to bridge the interlocutors who speak different languages. They will provide the speakers with information, whether to introduce, to explain or even to persuade. All the efforts are made for the conversation. Their task is to use target language to deliver the message accurately and timely to make the two or sometimes more interlocutors understand each other. In this case, escort interpreters have the same purpose as other communicators do.

And Anderson believes interpreters will have an influence on the conversation due to that they monopolize the means of communication [5]. This influence lies in that the escort interpreters adopt necessary communicative strategies to make the conversation go smoothly. Also, the informality of escort interpreting gives possibilities to interpreters to interfere in the conversations. This informality only refers to the occasions of escort interpreting, not implying the contents of source language are easier than those in conference interpreting. Compared with conference interpreters who are often limited by the regulations of certain occasions, escort interpreters have more freedom to mediate the conversations. For example, caused by the different cultural backgrounds of the two interlocutors, there might be words offensive in one culture but acceptable or common in the other. Then escort interpreters will have to omit the word or replace it so the listener will not be offended. This is what Kurt Lewin called the gatekeeper [6].

But queries about the escort interpreters’ too much interference are loud. Surely, they cannot go beyond their duties or interfere too much. Escort interpreters must learn to walk a fine line. This is why professional training and accreditation specifically for escort interpreters are significantly important.

**Escort Interpreter Training and Accreditation in China**

As mentioned above, escort interpreting in China is a different working mode from others. It is an act of communication, requires the interpreters to manage not only language proficiency and interpreting skills but communicative skills. Escort interpreters need to observe the situations and properly interfere the conversations, so as to help interlocutors achieve the effect of communication. Therefore, how to interpret with communicative skills must be included in the training and accreditation of escort interpreters.

In China, most interpreters are trained in universities and colleges before they work professionally. Since 2007, the first 15 universities were authorized to recruit candidates of MTI (Master of Translation and Interpreting), now schools who are qualified to grant MTI in China truly make a long list. Over the past few years, MTIs have become the main force in the interpreting market. The author surveyed the curriculum systems of more than twenty-five universities who have MTI education and found out that almost all of them concentrate on the training of conference interpreters. Normal courses include consecutive interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, sight interpreting, basic interpretation theories and so on. None of these universities establish a course named Escort Interpreting or the similar Liaison Interpreting. For practical purposes, escort interpreters need to be trained in terms of basic communicative skills and strategies, business etiquette, etc. It is a pity that the MTI cultivators who should have been at the forefront of this industry attach little importance on escort interpreting, let alone other private-owned training organizations.

The same situation happens in the accreditation of escort interpreting. There are three interpreting certificates with relatively high recognition accrediting the interpreters-to-be in China: China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI), Shanghai Interpretation Accreditation
(SIA), and Xiamen University English Interpreting Certificate (EIC). According to the syllabuses of them, CATTI Level III, EIC Level I and SIA Intermediate-Level more or less match the degree of difficulty and requirements to evaluate escort interpreters. More specific information about the three types of test is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. A comparison of CATTI Level III, EIC Level I and SIA Intermediate-Level [7].

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<thead>
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<th>CATTI Level III</th>
<th>EIC Level I</th>
<th>SIA Intermediate-Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contents</strong></td>
<td>1. Comprehensive competence of interpreting (to test candidates’ listening ability, comprehending ability and expression);</td>
<td>1. Single sentence interpreting; 2. Short dialogue interpreting (daily topics including reception, travel, shopping, accommodation and catering, etc.).</td>
<td>1. Written test including listening, reading, translating; 2. Oral test: test of spoken English and interpreting.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Interpreting practice (to test candidates’ listening comprehension, memorizing, information conveying and language expression).</td>
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<td><strong>Criteria</strong></td>
<td>1. Correct pronunciation and articulation; 2. Fluent flow of speech and proper speed of speech; 3. Being able to use proper interpreting skills and convey the information of source language without obvious mistakes and omission; 4. No apparent grammatical mistakes.</td>
<td>1. Quality of language: correct grammar, well organized language, decency of language, etc.; 2. Delivery of language: pronunciation, intonation, speed, fluency, etc. 3. Coping capacity and comprehensive quality.</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
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As shown in Table 1, the standard of evaluation of CATTI and EIC focus more on the quality of language itself. And the method of test of all the three is to play sound recordings to the candidates, require them to interpret in front of a computer and record their interpreting.

As a matter of fact, no matter which type of certificates people apply for, they would like to acquire a proof of their interpreting ability. The clients also regard such certificates as important qualification documents when employing the interpreters. From the client’s point of view, whether the interpreting is successful or not depends on the achievement of their communication effect, i.e. whether the target language listener is effectively informed. Hence, the evaluation cannot be judged solely by the quality of language alone, nor by the quantity of information conveyed. To help the market select more qualified escort interpreters, more specialized tests should be introduced. A more dynamic process assessment including the use of necessary communicative strategies is suggested.

**Suggestions**

Since escort interpreting, as demonstrated above is an act of communication and escort interpreters are not working mechanically, who are participants of the communication. In order to achieve the goal of the communication, the escort interpreters must take initiative to cope with different situations or conflicts during the conversation. That is to say, escort interpreters must have communicative competence or simply, some social skills. He or she must first of all detect the potential barriers or conflicts of communication and then adopt certain communicative strategies to reconcile the crisis. Therefore, organizers of the interpreting certificate tests are suggested to use
real-scenario cases to test the candidates. For example, instead of playing only audios to the candidates, videos that can show speakers facial expressions and movements will let the candidates observe the communication barriers that may appear so as to use certain communicative strategies to deal with the problems. Away from the communicative partners, the interpreters are not able to sharpen their communicative skills; away from the communicative scenes, the interpreters will not be fully aroused to react actively and stay focused to observe the feedbacks from the interlocutors [8]. To maximize the effectiveness of the tests, organizers will have to revivify the communicative scenes as much as possible.

**Summary**

Now, escort interpreters are in great demand in domestic market. For the betterment of the overall interpreter market, that the escort interpreting is a distinctive profession must be admitted. A qualified escort interpreter must be trained professionally and given matched accreditation. Apart from their language proficiency and information delivery, whether they have adopted certain communicative strategies to contribute to the effect of communication should be considered as well. Indeed, the author recognized there are limitations of this research. Much more work should be done in the future. Hopefully, this paper could bring more attention to the escort interpreting and escort interpreters in China.

**Reference**


