

“Everybody Speaks English Nowadays”. Conference Interpreters’ Perception of the Impact of English as a Lingua Franca on a Changing Profession¹

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Abstract

The unprecedented spread of English as the first global lingua franca for international communication has been identified in the literature on conference interpreting as one of the most significant issues for interpreting today. English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a major force of change for the profession and is generally viewed highly critically by professional interpreters, because it pushes them into a subsidiary role in dealing with multilingual communication.

This paper looks at conference interpreters’ perception of the impact of ELF on their profession and the ensuing changes, on the basis of the introspective comments made on ELF in Gentile’s 2016 global survey on interpreters’ self-perception of their professional status. The comments take particular significance from the fact that they picked out ELF as a central theme without any explicit formulation in the questions prompting respondents to do so. This can be taken as a clear sign of the importance interpreters attach to developments related to ELF.

Aspects addressed in the answers to the open questions fall into three broad categories: (1) the adverse effects of the spread of ELF on market conditions, (2) a decline in interpreter status and (3) an impoverishment of communication in international encounters. The paper provides a detailed account of the unsolicited qualitative comments on ELF by the respondents of Gentile’s survey and links them back to the results so far produced in the emerging subdiscipline of ITELf (interpreting, translation and English as a lingua franca) (Albl-Mikasa 2017).

¹ The present Cultus contribution is the result of a joint and coordinated effort of both authors. To comply with Italian academic rules, the article’s sections were divided as follows: Michaela Albl-Mikasa is the author of sections 1, 2 and 5, Paola Gentile of sections 3, 4 and 6.

1. Introduction

During the last century, conference interpreting used to be a prime choice when it came to dealing with the language issue in multilingual situations. This has changed considerably with the unprecedented spread of English as the first global lingua franca for international communication. As a result, “the predominance of English in conferences and of course in the world at large is probably the single most significant issue for interpreting today” (Donovan, 2011: 7). English used as a lingua franca (ELF) is not only a highly significant, but also a rather negatively connoted issue for interpreting professionals, described as the “top dissatisfaction factor [...] that leaves many interpreters frustrated” (cited in Donovan, 2009: 67) or “the challenge of trying to communicate when speakers hinder communication” (Jones, 2014). In an AIIC-based account, Jones (2014) discusses three main obstacles for the interpreting profession today, namely: (1) “new technologies” (including ICT and remote interpreting), (2) “poor communication skills” on the part of meeting participants, and (3) “the increasing use of international English (“Globish”)”.

These hindrances were echoed in Gentile’s (2016) global survey on interpreters’ self-perception of their professional status, which obtained a total of 805 responses from conference interpreters and 888 from community interpreters² around the world. The 805 responses from conference interpreters included 469 answers to open questions. Of these answers, 51 or almost 11%, zeroed in on global English negatively affecting the profession. What is worth noting here is that ELF was picked out as a central theme without any explicit formulation in the questions prompting respondents to do so. The three questions that triggered comments on ELF read as follows:

1. Do you think that the interpreting profession will change in the next few years?
2. In your opinion, to what extent are the following changes likely to occur?

² Numerous names have been used to describe interpreting in public service settings. After controversial debate among the 29 countries in the committee developing the first international standard for community interpreting (the 2014 ISO International Standard 13611), “ISO adopted the term ‘community interpreting’ for the title of the first truly international standard for the profession. It is still the most widely used term today and likely to remain so.” “Community interpreting distinguishes itself from other interpreting professions, including conference, media, escort and military interpreting” with its focus on bilateral, dialogic interpreting in the consecutive mode and the “socio-economic status of the participants and the interpreter’s need to navigate imbalances of power and control” (Bancroft, 2015: 219). It typically occurs in legal, healthcare, social service and educational settings, although many feel that the broad field of legal interpreting is not part of community interpreting and should be dealt with separately (Bancroft, 2015: 220).

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- the importance of interpreting will be acknowledged
 - more conference interpreting will be needed
 - more public service interpreting will be needed
 - interpreters will become more visible thanks to social networks
 - fees will progressively decrease
3. Any other comments about your experience or the interpreting profession are greatly appreciated.

This paper provides a detailed account of the unsolicited qualitative comments on ELF made by the respondents of Gentile’s survey and of how professional conference interpreters perceive their profession to have changed or to be likely to change in the future due to the impact of global English. The majority of respondents who explicitly commented on ELF were based in Europe (38), but some also came from Canada (4), the US (2), Peru (2), Mexico (1), Colombia (1), Brazil (1), Argentina (1) and Australia (1). Of the European respondents, 2 were from Switzerland and 36 were from EU countries, namely Belgium (13), Italy (6), the UK (4), Germany (3), Austria (3), France (2), Spain (1), the Netherlands (1), Finland (1), the Czech Republic (1) and Slovakia (1). 38 respondents were female, 12 male. In terms of experience, most participants had been interpreters for over 20 years (33 participants as opposed to 17), which means that they had been in the profession long enough to have witnessed any developments and to found their comments on long-standing experience. The detailed breakdown of the responses is as follows:

Years of experience	Number of respondents	Years of experience	Number of respondents
1-5	2	21-25	9
6-10	2	26-30	5
10-15	2	31-35	7
16-20	11	35+	12
1-20	17	21-40	33

Table 1: Breakdown into years of experience

It is also interesting to note that there seemed to be *no difference* between the responses given by the interpreters working for international institutions and those who are active on the private market. This may be due to the fact that even in international institutions, such as the EU, which offers large-scale translation and interpreting services to ensure each speaker’s right to speak their first language, the encroachment of ELF has been unstoppable. For practical and economic reasons, the EU’s policy has moved from “full multilingualism” to “cost-efficient multilingualism” (Albl-Mikasa, 2017: 381). Although Gazzola and Grin highlight that the exclusive use of English would be unfair, since “50% of

EU citizens aged 15 or more do not speak English” (2013: 102), and that “a multilingual, translation-based language regime is both more effective and more fair than a unilingual regime based on English – even if it is dressed up as ELF” (2013: 104), ELF has been and will continue to be an increasingly omnipresent factor for interpreters in the institutions. This is unlikely to change even in view of Brexit. In his discussion of knock-on effects for other languages on the basis of interviews with EU administrators, interpreters, lobbyists and other institutional representatives, Riley (2017) concludes that a move away from English as a lingua franca in the EU is considered improbable by the interviewees at least in the near future.

The following analysis of responses can, therefore, be considered illustrative of the ongoing changes. In most of the open comments addressing the issue of international English in response to the three questions outlined above, several aspects were specified. These aspects, taken from answers provided by 51 respondents, fall into three broad categories: (1) the adverse effects of the spread of ELF on market conditions, (2) a decline in interpreter status and (3) an impoverishment of communication in international encounters.

2. Shrinking markets

Featuring in a total of 19 comments, the most frequently mentioned aspect was the observation of the spread of ELF and the dominance of various Englishes in conference contexts. Fifteen respondents believed this to be unavoidable, since more and more people are multilingual and speak (or believe they speak) English. This was said to be particularly true among executives and the new generation of delegates, who speak or are supposed to speak English.

In this first set of comments, conference participants’ increasing command of English was also associated with financial consequences. Eight respondents mentioned cost-related factors and financial constraints related to the use of ELF. In some cases, ELF, along with the increasing degree of multilingualism leading people to believe that they can do without interpreting, was regarded as the cause of price or interpreter-fee dumping. In other remarks, expenditure cuts in businesses and international organizations were seen to play into the hands of the growing use of (non-native) English, pushing people into communicating in English rather than with the assistance of interpreters. The intertwining of cost-saving and the use of ELF was most drastically expressed in the following comment made by a female Italian AIIC interpreter in the “26-30 years of experience” group:

The private market is shrinking, and we often have to interpret treasurers congratulating themselves on how much money they have saved by not recruiting interpreters and holding meetings in English.

A knowledge of English these days is often a prerequisite to getting any job with international links, and so fewer and fewer private clients see interpreters as a justified expense. Many colleagues feel the profession of conference interpreter will not last longer than a few more decades.

The ensuing decreasing demand and less pressing need for interpreters was the second most frequently mentioned aspect, noted by 18 respondents.

The inexorable spread of global bad English, combined by short-term spending cuts will affect the profession (male Belgian interpreter in the “21-25 years of experience” group).

Many international organisations have now English as their only working language as opposed to several working languages (requiring interpretation at meetings) (female Austrian interpreter with more than 35 years of experience).

Between English becoming the lingua franca (due to globalization) and the universal push to lower costs at all levels, mediocre interpretation is hastening the profession’s decline. There will be far less demand for interpreters and more current users will turn to speaking pigeon English (sic.) rather than pay for what they consider a ‘luxury’. The many unqualified or poor interpreters are a nail in the coffin of the profession (female Canadian interpreter in the “31-35 years of experience” group).

This last comment shows that internal factors, namely interpreters failing to provide the high quality needed to demonstrate the added value that justifies the expense their service entails, may add to external ones, such as the push towards English-only meetings. That the profession might cease to exist due to such developments was expressed by five more respondents, who were “considering other career options” (a female Finnish interpreter with 16-20 years’ experience) or who would not recommend the profession to their children.

3. Decline in interpreter status

The most noticeable effect of the abovementioned developments is a loss in status and lack of prestige, which was expressed in 13 comments. Where interpreters “once met a clear need [they] are now seen as irrelevant to communication” (male Swiss interpreter with more than 35 years of work experience) and “are only very rarely and by very few people looked upon as professionals” (male Italian interpreter with over 35 years of experience). Three

respondents used the expression “necessary evil” to describe the decrease in the acknowledgement of interpreters’ importance. This is also reflected in the deplorable custom of listeners who now tend to “constantly monitor the performance of the interpreters and eagerly correct any ‘mistakes’” (female Finnish interpreter in the “16-20 years of experience” group). This ill-informed and disregarding attitude was also highlighted by the female Italian interpreter mentioned above:

Interpreters are nowadays often seen as a necessary evil in the EU institutions and sometimes an unnecessary expense. The constant checking done by delegations in meetings, with nodding and twitching as we work shows a lack of confidence in our abilities and destroys morale. This is a new phenomenon and is a clear demonstration of our reduced status, even though the job has become far more difficult with increasingly technical subject-matter and large language regimes due to EU enlargement (female Italian AIIIC interpreter in the “26-30 years of experience” group).

Ignorance, misunderstandings and misinterpretations revolving around the interpreter’s task and role are repeatedly mentioned as a cause for the erosion of the interpreter’s status.

The knowledge of English will continue to grow. Many potential users see interpreters as a necessary evil. It is normal that we, as human beings, do not want to be dependent on others. So, most people would prefer to communicate directly in bad English rather than to pay for an interpreter. However, most users are not aware of the enormous cultural gaps that exist (male Belgian interpreter in the “6-10 years of experience” group).

Non-interpreters are usually completely awed when they hear that I am a conference interpreter who does SIMULTANEOUS interpreting (“oh that must be so difficult, I don’t understand how anyone can do that!”). When they hear that I mainly work in the language pair Finnish <> English, their admiration disappears: “But why, everyone speaks English!” (female Finnish interpreter in the “16-20 years of experience” group).

Ill-conceived notions and attitudes relate not only to interpreters, but are also found with respect to ELF speakers’ capacity to live up to the requirements of effective communication, which, despite being the very purpose of meetings and conferences, is safeguarded to an ever lesser extent.

4. Impoverishment of international communication

According to six respondents, people tend to resort to English rather than interpreting based on a general view that “you can negotiate everything in BAD English” (female Spanish interpreters in the “16-20 years of experience” group). This may not apply to high-level meetings, where, for reasons of protocol or national pride, speakers may choose to speak in their own language and rely on interpretation (e.g. the Thai and Indian prime ministers at the UN General Assembly of late). Or there may be cultural differences, whereby, especially in Eastern countries, speakers might also rely on their mother tongue so as not to lose face due to a poor performance. Beyond these aspects, interpreters have observed a growing tendency among speakers using English to rather grossly misjudge their limited English language skills:

If people were really aware of the ridiculous level of broken English they speak, they would realize the intellectually poor image they deliver and choose their mother tongue (female Belgian interpreter in the “21-25 years of experience” group).

Such overestimations are, in fact, a phenomenon repeatedly reported by conference interpreters as documented in Jones’ AICC-based account:

The vast majority of speakers who choose to speak English as a foreign language in international meetings overestimate their competence [...]. Often there are problems with collocations, such that speakers end up being unclear and sometimes even saying the opposite of what they mean. An example of this [...] is that of a very senior politician I heard saying at a high-level meeting, “we must be careful to do this”, when she meant “we should be careful about doing this”, which is of course the exact opposite (Jones 2014).

According to the interpreters, this constitutes a clear obstacle to successful and effective communication:

People think they speak the same language, but it is rarely the case. Interpretation will be important after miscommunication incidents in English. Right now, people think that if everyone speaks English everything will be fine (female Canadian interpreter in the “11-15 years of experience” group).

Interpreters’ unique positioning as “first-hand witnesses to actual language use” and, at the same time, “outsiders to the interests at stake” (Donovan, 2009: 62, 66), lends weight to their statement that ELF speakers regularly “misunderstand [...] each other” (Albl-Mikasa, 2017: 373). Similarly, five

respondents explicitly voiced their concern about the “English language being slaughtered” (female US-American interpreter with more than 35 years of experience), and they also pointed out that “the richness of communication has suffered from oversimplification of expression” (female Argentinian interpreter with more than 35 years of experience).

In sum, there is a widespread feeling among interpreters that they are trapped in a vicious circle of sorts. As more and more people overestimate and use their English(es) in oversimplified ways, the level of acceptance for relying on ELF rather than interpretation will rise at the expense of effective communication and the intelligent instrumentalization of language. As described in the European Union’s 2016 publication entitled *Misused English Words and Expressions in EU Publications*, this tendency seems to be becoming increasingly institutionalized. Accordingly, MEPs and EU officials tend to use words that do not exist or are relatively unfamiliar to native English speakers. All of these phenomena are already undermining the recognition of the value of professional interpreters.

5. A changing profession

Within the interpreting profession, there is a widespread sense that the global spread of ELF in international contexts is changing communication requirements and practices. This is compounded by the rise of new technologies. Eight respondents voiced their concerns about the unholy alliance between ELF and modern internet-based technology. Distant web-based or remote interpreting as well as machine translation are expected to bring about major and unfavorable changes to the profession, which will downgrade a once “much-admired feat commanding high social esteem – and substantial fees” (Pöchhacker, 2011: 322) to a simple commodity in the eyes of the client.

Distant web-based interpreting will make more way; the *commoditisation* of conference interpreting will progress; from and into-English conference work will become even more prevalent (female British interpreter in the “31-35 years of experience” group; our emphasis).

Many executives are learning languages now, especially English, and new technologies are being developed to help the interaction in different languages, not to the extent of replacing the interpreters but my guess is all this will change the scenario somehow (female Peruvian interpreter in the “16-20 years of experience” group).

Much like ELF, new technologies are a rather mixed blessing. While saving time and transportation costs or travel expenses are undeniable advantages of

video conference technology in conference and public service settings (Pöchhacker, 2014; Ehrlich & Napier, 2015), the results of the questionnaire study conducted by Berber revealed that conference interpreters “are more sceptical about the effectiveness of ICTs for their work: some even referring to it as interfering to listening and concentration, or they are altogether against considering ICTs an integral or important part of interpreting” (2008: 202). Moreover, in both conference and community settings, the use of video conference and remote interpreting has been linked to considerably higher stress levels among interpreters (Moser-Mercer, 2003; Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). Additional stress and cognitive load (rather than threats of being made redundant) are among the most prominent disadvantages of ELF and new technologies for interpreters at present.

Another downside is the shift in relevant language combinations, as pointed out in the first quote above. This has also manifested itself in a strong pull towards markets becoming “increasingly two-way – the national language plus English, with a corresponding assumption that interpreters will cover both directions, i.e. provide a retour into their B language” (Donovan, 2011: 14).

I think that it will become a must to have a retour language in the near future. I also think that for certain languages the need for interpretation will no longer be that strong as in certain countries people learn English from early on and are absolutely confident to express themselves in English. I am referring to countries like Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands (female German interpreter in the “21-25 years of experience” group).

While retour interpreting has long been the standard in countries of lesser-used languages, such as Finland (Beeby Lonsdale, 2009), countries like Germany used to rely to a much greater extent on the provision of multiple language booths and A-language interpreting. One consequence of ELF clearly is a drop in the provision of numerous language combinations at conferences and their replacement with only one language pair, namely the host language and English (Albl-Mikasa, 2017: 370), to the detriment of interpreters without English in their language profile, not to mention linguistic diversity. Against this backdrop, it seems indispensable for interpreters to have a strong B-language and also an English A or B in their repertoire of working languages. The above developments also result in an increased need for a strong entrepreneurial spirit among interpreters, reinforced lobbying and backup from the associations. If interpreters increasingly find they are only needed “to communicate more complex and innovative things” (female Argentinian interpreter with more than 35 years of experience) or “after miscommunication incidents” (female Canadian interpreter in the “11-15 years of experience” group), they are indeed in a

situation where they have to “defend the right to interpreting” (Donovan, 2011: 16) and rise to the challenge that “interpreting must be that much better than muddling through with the *lingua franca*” (Donovan, 2011: 17).

Interpreters are the main cause of the downturn trend in terms of their fees. Totally unable, also within the various societies and associations, to protect themselves (male Italian interpreter with more than 35 years of experience).

Market and working conditions have clearly undergone marked changes so that interpreters can no longer afford to sit idle and wait for assignments to descend on them. This has been expressed in interviews with professionals as well as by the former President of AIIC:

We interpreters know simply too little about our job, about the processes involved in interpreting, the amount of time we invest in the profession in terms of preparatory work and professional development (and what that means in financial terms), about copyright and its consequences, etc., etc. How do you market a product you do not know? (experienced female Swiss interpreter in Albl-Mikasa, 2014: 814).

Translators and interpreters may be highly trained and qualified, but a major challenge for them is how to find work, to market their skills and maintain good working conditions on these changing markets within what is now an industry – said to be amongst the fastest growing in the world. Most colleagues complete academic training with no idea of marketing or business skills, although the law will call them, individually, ‘a small business’ [...] (Linda Fitchett, President of AIIC from 2012 to 2015, in Albl-Mikasa, 2014).

Finally, another major shift on the horizon is the closing of the gap between conference and community interpreting. As conference interpreting becomes more of a niche product due to the developments outlined above and community interpreting grows stronger and more professionalized in the wake of migration and refugee movements, the differences in role, status and remuneration will become blurred. The strict separation between conference and community interpreting assignments may, thus, become a thing of the past.

As in conference interpreting, English is also highly likely to play an increasingly significant role in community interpreting settings in light of the current influx of refugees and spreading command of some English, at least among the younger generations. So far, this issue has been explored mainly by Määttä (2017). In the survey analyzed in this paper, too, only five respondents mentioned English in the 718 qualitative comments made as part of the 888

responses from community interpreters. While this seems to suggest that ELF is not yet a pressing issue among community interpreters, the growing importance of ELF in public service interpreting (PSI) settings is showing its face as rather decisively expressed in one of the five comments:

In Denmark, I could imagine a rise in the number of refugees and (illegal) immigrants needing PSIs. That is: I could envision a future where more users of interpreters request interpreting in languages that are their second or third languages (English, French ...) rather than their first native language (which in Denmark would be more exotic/rarer languages such as African tribal languages and Middle Eastern dialects). As far as I have been hearing, often it is simply not possible to find a qualified interpreter, or indeed any interpreter at all, who can communicate in such languages (female Danish interpreter in the “11-15 years of experience” group).

Moreover, a further two of the five comments addressed clients’ ill-conceived belief that their English proficiency was good enough for them to be able to go without an interpreter.

I often come across people who apologize to me for the inconvenience of calling me in, for example for a police interview. They seem to believe that their own English is proficient enough to do the interview themselves. (To be fair, Danes are generally pretty good at speaking English!) More often than not, 5 minutes in, they realise that they actually need my help after all (female Danish interpreter in the “26-35 years of experience” group).

Until now I had no negative experience with service providers. From time to time the client, who spoke some English, insisted that the presence of the interpreter was not needed (female Norwegian interpreter in the “11-15 years of experience” group).

Another reason why interpreters are deemed much less of a necessity is the frequent view, as expressed in the fourth comment, that migrants “should learn to speak English” (male interpreter from the UK in the “21-25 years of experience” group). Especially in the UK, there is now a government tendency to use this kind of justification for the implementation of cuts in the provision of language services for immigrants (Gentile, 2017). The last comment, finally, made by a female Polish interpreter in the “21-25 years of experience” group, broached the issue of deteriorating native language levels due to the use of ELF.

It should be noted that the five comments mentioned above were unsolicited responses. We assume that a survey explicitly addressing the growing use of English (or French) as a lingua franca in community interpreter-mediated

settings would yield much richer and highly interesting results. ELF in community interpreting has been identified as a prime topic for investigation in the new translation and interpreting studies (TIS) subdiscipline of ITELF (interpreting, translation and English as a lingua franca) (Albl-Mikasa, 2017).

In fact, in the context of ITELF, a small-scale survey directly addressing ELF in relation to conference interpreting (Albl-Mikasa, 2010) obtained more detailed results, which clearly point to the profession changing under the influence of ELF. Responses came from thirty-two professional interpreters, 23 based in Germany and nine in Switzerland. In the quantitative breakdown, 81% of them felt that globalisation and the spread of ELF had a noticeably adverse effect on their work as an interpreter and 72% that conferences were increasingly two-way and that there was a marked cut in booths for languages other than English. Some 69% reported that the number of interpreting assignments had decreased due to an increase in English-only communication. Most respondents entertained fears regarding the profession's future (59%) or foresaw a noticeable shift from conference to community interpreting (16%). Concerns were less pronounced for those working on the Swiss market and older participants nearing retirement age. Qualitative remarks in response to open questions highlighted negative effects regarding a decline in the demand for interpreters (40%); changing assignment patterns (towards more tele-/video-interpreting, community interpreting, or legal proceedings/depositions and product presentations) (9%); changing contracting behaviour on the part of clients (calling interpreters only for highly complex and technical events) (13%); and a flattening of communication and impoverishment of language (9%). A general sense that interpreters could only subsist by providing a high-quality performance and the utmost professionalism was also demonstrated.

6. Conclusion

The above analysis of 51 unsolicited comments on the impact of ELF on the interpreting profession suggests that there are not only considerable concerns among professional interpreters, but also that these concerns are justified. Dropping demand, ignorant or non-appreciative client attitudes, cost-cutting priorities as well as ill-conceived beliefs about communication and language skills are clearly felt to undermine a once highly prestigious profession. The fact that most respondents who expressed their concerns in the comments were women with a postgraduate degree in Translation and Interpreting and the average number of years of experience was in the 21-25 range may be linked to the general trend observed in the 2016 Gentile survey, according to which highly educated female interpreters are less self-assured about their status and have more pessimistic views about the future of the profession than men. At the same time, the (admittedly limited) body of evidence from research efforts on ELF and

interpreting so far (Albl-Mikasa, 2017) seems to suggest that such introspective views of the professionals are backed up by tangible developments which make ELF and new technologies a crucial and precarious issue regarding the considerable changes the interpreting profession is undergoing.

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