



This is a contribution from

*Cultus:*

*The Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication*

2021: 14

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## Hybridisation adds value in translation and interpreting

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### *Abstract*

*With machine translation and machine interpreting now providing unprecedented quality, translators and interpreters need to up their game to stay in business (Tomarenko 2019). We know that translators and interpreters do not just replace words – they use words to convey meanings from a source language to a target language. Only when they fully grasp the meanings, nuances and implications behind the words can they phrase the original idea in the way that best resonates with the target audience. And this only works when translators and interpreters truly are specialised by domain (Durban 2010). Yet added value can also be created through a more radical form of specialisation, which I call hybridisation. When translators and interpreters also possess skills that belong ‘on the other side of the fence’ and are willing to take risks (Katan 2016: 365-381; Pym 2015: 67-80), they step out of their traditional roles and perform tasks that are not limited to the rendition of a written or spoken text from a language to another. In fact, hybrid professionals provide a consulting service rather than a language service in the strict sense. Drawing on concrete examples from my own professional experience, I will show how two highly specialised services, namely the transcreation of TV advertisements and media interpreting for the music industry, can benefit enormously from professionals wearing more than one hat. E.g., a ‘translator plus’ (translator + copywriter) may also direct the voiceover recording session for a TV commercial, while an ‘interpreter plus’ (interpreter + journalist) may in practice become an additional and highly valued member of an artist’s PR team.*

*Keywords: translation; interpreting; transcreation*

### **1. The game changer: Neural machine translation (NMT)**

Whether written or oral, translation as an activity dates back to the dawn of civilization, but its evolution as a profession seems to go hand in hand with technological advancements. Without innovation, translators would still

write with pen and paper, and simultaneous interpretation simply would not exist. While translators and interpreters agree that technology has helped them work better and faster, not all of them seem to be enthusiastic about one of the latest developments in computational linguistics.

Machine translation (MT) has been around for decades and its poor output has long been derided by professional translators, who were confident they would never lose their jobs. Computers could never compete with human quality, or so they thought. Then came neural machine translation (NMT), the real game changer. A deep (machine) learning (DL) process based on neural networks, NMT provides unprecedented quality that may even pass for the work of a professional translator. A case in point is the neural-based translation system Charles University Block-Backtranslation-Improved Transformer Translation (CUBBITT), which claims to have “significantly outperformed professional-agency English-to-Czech news translation in preserving text meaning” (Popel *et al.* 2020: 1). Furthermore, in a sentence-level translation Turing test with 16 participants, “CUBBITT was not significantly distinguished from human translations by three professional translators, three MT researchers, and three other participants” (*ibidem.* 7-8). If most professionals did not notice it was MT, it is safe to assume that most clients would not be able to tell the difference either. So, the question arises: Why would they be willing to pay for human translation, when MT is much faster and, according to this study, even better than human quality?

Machine interpreting (MI) is a process which typically involves three steps, namely speech recognition to transcribe a speech (speech-to-text), MT to translate the resulting written text, and speech synthesis to convert the translated written text into speech (text-to-speech). Although MI is currently not the solution of choice in high-level contexts, it looks like this might change with the introduction of a ‘simultaneous written translation’ system by the European Parliament. Its purpose will be to help members access debates on screen, including hard of hearing people who currently have no direct access to the debates. A consortium formed by Cedat85, a provider of automatic speech recognition and speech-to-text technology, SDL (later acquired by RSW), a language and content company, and Bertin IT, a provider of software solutions in cybersecurity and in cyber and voice intelligence, ranked first in a tender to provide real-time, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered transcription and translation services for the

European Parliament plenary sessions<sup>1</sup>. The solution involves speech recognition, transcription and transmission of the written text to the AI system that will then translate it into 24 languages. With its algorithms analysing the three to four previous and subsequent words in order to recognise and correctly translate the semantic use of a word, the system will learn from corrections and user feedback, improving its quality over time<sup>2</sup>. The announcement raised the eyebrows of many professionals, as the interpreting services of the European Union are the world's largest employers of conference interpreters<sup>3</sup>. While EU institutions will surely continue to rely on human interpreters to translate their proceedings in real time, one is left to wonder how many of them will be used for such multilingual debates in the future, once this speech translation system is implemented.

## 2. Moving upmarket through specialisation

As MT quality continues to improve and translators risk losing their jobs to machines, they need to focus on the things where they can make a difference, because that is where machines are failing (Tomarenko 2019: 286).

Kevin Hendzel, award-winning translator, linguist, author, national media consultant and translation industry expert, distinguishes three different markets where a translator can operate:

- the bulk market, i.e. “the estimated 60% of commercial translation done ‘for informational purposes,’ or to ‘convey basic information’ where ‘good enough’ is the standard and price is the primary basis of selection, because GT [Google Translate] (free) is considered a serious option”;
- the added-value market, “where the translations are typically in a specialized subject-area that is sensitive enough for clients to pause at the thought of using GT or any machine translation at all”;

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.wired.it/economia/business/2020/11/11/parlamento-europeo-traduzione-tempo-reale/?refresh\\_ce](https://www.wired.it/economia/business/2020/11/11/parlamento-europeo-traduzione-tempo-reale/?refresh_ce) (last accessed 1 September 2021)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1c437dc0-49c5-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-70578119> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

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- the premium market, which “requires exceptional subject-area knowledge, exquisite writing skills, and a lifetime of collaboration with your most talented colleagues”<sup>4</sup>.

Although in this paper I use the term ‘value’ and related expressions like ‘added value’ or ‘create (more) value’ with regard to high-stakes contexts where MT and MI are totally out of the question – and which therefore would match Hendzel’s definition of “premium market” rather than “added-value market” – I agree with him that translators should move upmarket, or they will become obsolete. A prerequisite to access the most lucrative market is subject-matter expertise: “your level of specialization should be on a level equivalent to a practitioner in that field”<sup>5</sup>. In other words, translators should shift their focus from language to specialist knowledge of their clients’ industry (Durban 2010). When translations are done by subject-matter experts, they “tend to be more like paraphrase and adaptation, and are marked by greater individual freedom of expression” (Tomarenko 2019: 286). Translators who are specialised in a given domain understand all the meanings and implications of the source text beyond the words actually used by the author, which makes them more prone to ‘freedom’ when faced with the ‘fidelity vs freedom’ dilemma. Specialised translators have no fear of straying from the source text, because they know the ins and outs of their client’s industry, and they avoid ‘safe solutions’ because they want to make their translations truly fit for purpose. There is no guesswork on their part, and if they should have queries or comments, they would share them with their clients – the premium market values a collaborative relationship between translators and clients. In this respect, we can associate specialised translators with risk-takers (Katan 2016: 365-381; Pym 2015: 67-80).

### 3. A particular kind of specialisation: Hybridisation

While specialisation in translation implies deep knowledge of a subject-matter (Durban 2010; Hendzel 2017; Tomarenko 2019), with this paper I would like to propose a more radical form of specialisation, which I call hybridisation. Based on my own professional experience, I argue that

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem.*

possessing skills that belong ‘on the other side of the fence’ contributes to a risk-prone, versatile, premium professional profile that creates more value for clients.

I call myself an Italian communications all-rounder not only because I wear more than one hat (I provide several different services in the field of communications), but also because I have gained professional experience not only as adaptor/translator, but within exactly the same fields as creator/writer. I translate press releases, but when I used to be a freelance publicist, I would write press releases. I interpret for journalists at press conferences, but I first attended that kind of events as a journalist myself. I adapt advertising and marketing copy from English or German into my native Italian, but I also create copy in Italian from scratch.

I will here focus on two of the services I offer:

- Transcreation, with particular regard to television commercials (TVCs), in section 4
- Interpreting, with particular regard to media interpreting for the music industry, in section 5.

Hybridisation results from me being respectively:

- A copywriter (someone who creates a script for a TVC and knows how to choose and direct actors) + a translator (someone who translates a script written in a foreign language)
- A journalist (someone who attends a foreign music artist’s press conference and then uses the artist’s translated speech to write a feature) + an interpreter (someone who, at a press conference, translates the journalists’ questions to the artist as well as the artist’s answers to journalists).

Hybridisation not only defies traditional roles but, in my opinion, also suits my clients’ needs better.

#### **4. Translator + copywriter: The transcreation of TV commercials**

A portmanteau combining ‘translation’ and ‘creation’, the term ‘transcreation’ has been in use for over 60 years, but neither its definition nor its fields of application seem to be universally recognized.

In translation studies, the first attested occurrence of the word ‘transcreation’ is to be found within the field of literary translation. Purushottama Lal, an Indian poet and scholar, used it back in 1957 to refer to his Sanskrit to English rendition of classical Indian drama. Although he did not provide a formal definition of transcreation, he explained the approach he used to achieve such literary feat, stating that “the thing to do is to attempt to preserve not the Sanskrit language but the Hindu tradition which it enshrines” (Lal 1996: 43). The purpose of transcreation was to capture the spirit of the text and recreate it in a different language to engage the reader, “trying to reflect, somehow, the cultural source” (Sales Salvador 2005: 196). Along similar lines, within the field of literary translation, “transcreation can be said to be a target-oriented, aesthetic recreation” (Gopinathan 2000: 171).

However, from a functionalist perspective (Reiß and Vermeer 1984; Nord 1997), every translation in any domain must be fit for purpose, and method and strategy in the translation process must be chosen accordingly. Consequently, it could be argued that translators might as well manipulate the source text in order to produce a target text that performs its intended function, and yet the end result will still be called a ‘translation’, regardless of how much the target text strayed from the source text. For this reason, the very notion that transcreation is a practice worthy of a different name is not shared by all academics.

Among the scholars who do regard transcreation as something different from translation, Ira Torresi (2010) proposes that transcreation concerns promotional texts and takes place only when the whole source text is rebuilt so that it can resonate with the target language and culture. Viviana Gaballo (2012: 108) concludes that transcreation is a way to tackle texts in any domain, even legal, where the introduction of neologisms to fill semantic voids “fulfills the goal of transcreation in that it allows the translator to cross the borders of the ‘established’ terminology to depict the new rules of interpretation of a world of concurring powers”. David Katan (2015) also embraces the idea of transcreation as an approach that can be applied to different fields, rather than as a specific practice limited to specific genres. Based on the notion of translation as intercultural mediation and on survey results revealing that, when faced with the ‘fidelity vs freedom’ dilemma, translators seem to be more inclined towards the former, Katan suggests that the time may have come for translators to take the “transcreational turn”. The willingness to take risks (Katan 2016: 365-381; Pym 2015: 67-80) seems to be a decisive factor in this change of perspective. On the one hand,

globalization needs professionals who can facilitate communication by reducing the cultural distance, and only translators who take risks can do so. On the other hand, machine translation quality is improving dramatically, which endangers the survival of low-risk, faithful translators. For said scholars, transcreation can only be defined as such *ex post* (i.e. once work has been performed and a liberal approach has been taken to convey the source text), not *ex ante* – transcreation appears to be a translation strategy implemented to serve a purpose.

In the advertising industry, however, transcreation is identified with a specific type of service: the interlinguistic and intercultural adaptation of marketing and advertising copy. Traditionally, an advertising agency with a global reach would take care of both the origination of the master copy of a global campaign and the transcreation of such copy for local markets. The source copy would typically be created by the agency's headquarters (usually in English), and the local adaptations into target languages would be performed by the agency's copywriters working in offices in target-language countries. In an attempt to both cut costs and have more control over the transcreation outcomes so that messaging is not diluted when adapted for a number of different countries, many global brands have embraced the "smart centralization" model described by Simon Anholt (2000). Consequently, they have trusted centralized implementation agencies with the transcreation of their advertising materials and other services, most notably production. Such agencies usually receive the master from advertising agencies and then have it adapted by freelance in-market translators-copywriters worldwide. In this scenario, whoever delivers the transcreation performs a task that used to be a prerogative of an advertising agency copywriter. This aspect is crucial to understanding not only one of the key skills that transcreation requires (further described in this section), but also the role of the transcreation professional as "intervenient" and "risk-taker", to put it in Katan's (2016) and Pym's (2015) words.

I have called transcreation as "a hybrid practice/service halfway between translation and copywriting" (Benetello 2018: 29), and fellow practitioner Nina Sattler-Hovdar has more concisely proposed the equation "Transcreation = Translation + Copywriting" (Sattler-Hovdar 2019: 22). In my opinion, transcreation is "writing advertising or marketing copy for a specific market, starting from copy written in a source language, as if the target text had originated in the target language and culture" (Benetello 2018: 40-41). I for one regard transcreation as a service, not as an approach or strategy which only takes place when a literal translation is not possible.



On a case-by-case basis, the transcreation professional establishes whether a close rendition of the source text will have the desired impact on the target audience, or whether the text should be manipulated to some extent to fit the target market and culture. In some cases, rather than transposing a source text into a target language, they end up writing the copy from scratch based on a brief written in a foreign language, and thus create a new original (Benetello 2017). Therefore, in my opinion, a transcreation professional must possess copywriting skills, which are essential both to assess whether a close rendition of the copy will prove effective in the target language and to succeed in recreating the copy based on the brief, if deemed necessary. When a 1:1 transposition will do, there is no need to subvert the original copy, as long as a faithful approach is the result of a professional evaluation, not of a lack of writing skills. As a matter of fact, I have argued that a transcreation professional needs to have translation skills, copywriting skills, cultural sensitivity and local market understanding, which in turn make such professional a  $\frac{1}{4}$  a translator,  $\frac{1}{4}$  a copywriter,  $\frac{1}{4}$  a ‘cultural anthropologist’ of sorts and  $\frac{1}{4}$  a marketer (Benetello 2018: 41).

Transcreation therefore appears to be a fully-fledged consulting service rather than a language service in the strict sense, also because a transcreation professional may be required to perform tasks that are not limited to the rendition of a written text from a language to another. The transcreation of TVCs is an interesting case in point, because it usually entails additional services which are nonetheless part and parcel of transcreation as I intend it. What follows is an account of my own experience working on one particular TV campaign but, as far as I can see, the workflow I describe is rather common when performing transcreation for global campaigns in general.

#### **4.1 Script transcreation**

In a typical transcreation workflow, regardless of the type of text to work on (e.g. a print ad, a television commercial, a brochure etc.), the first thing a transcreation professional would do is establish whether the copy to be adapted, the visual used or any element of the advertising strategy chosen by the brand are suitable for the target market and culture, flagging any issues that may cause reputational damage to the brand. This phase may be part of a whole transcreation process or be required as a standalone service, as is often the case with brand name evaluation. When it comes to television

commercials, provided that there are no cultural issues to be flagged at a preliminary stage (e.g. when the storyboard of a film which still has to be shot is shared with the transcreation professional), the first step is adapting the script from one language to another.

In 2014, Ryanair launched its first pan-European advertising campaign to showcase three improved services – free second bag, allocated seating and new website – and I adapted the scripts of three 20-second TVCs from English to Italian. I provided multiple options in Italian, an English back translation of my options, as well as comments to explain the directions I took. These three practices are one of the elements which in my opinion contribute to making transcreation a consulting service. As personal sensitivity and taste play a major role in any text that is supposed to persuade the reader and reflect the brand identity, transcreation professionals – just like copywriters writing copy from scratch – are usually asked to provide variety in their creative output by presenting several different options. Transcreation professionals usually back-translate their transcreation options into the source language as closely as possible, and – again, just like copywriters – explain the rationale behind their creative and stylistic choices. The transcreation is first approved by the global client (i.e. the headquarters of a global brand), who can only assess the adaptations through the back translation and the comments provided. Once the global client gives their go-ahead, the local client (i.e. the target-country branch of the global brand) evaluates the transcreation in the target language. As is often the case with copywriters, transcreation professionals are usually expected to engage in an interactional relationship with the client, e.g. being willing to rework the transcreation options provided, validate amendments proposed by the client, or even join conference calls before, during, or after transcreation work is performed to make sure both parties are on the same wavelength. Although all of this may not happen with each and every client and project, I would argue that, in general, transcreation professionals are perceived as co-creators of marketing and advertising copy, which accounts for the active role that is required of them.

The approved Italian versions of the Ryanair scripts can be read in the following tables. It should be noted that the English scripts I received for adaptation – which fall under the definition of confidential information and therefore cannot be disclosed – were slightly different from the ones below, which however match the English-language TVCs publicly available on YouTube (linked in footnotes, alongside with the final Italian TVCs). Therefore, the copy provided in the English column should not be regarded

as the 100% exact source text I worked with. Based on the brief, for each and every line I established whether a faithful rendition of the source copy would sound natural, pack a punch and reflect the brand’s tone of voice, or whether I should move away from the source text and come up with something different. For voiceover lines, I had to also take into account synch points and therefore make sure the length of my Italian lines would tie in well with the different scenes in the film.

<b>English<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>Italian<sup>7</sup></b>	<b>English back translation</b>
<p>[Voiceover] Here’s two-bags Julia about to board her Ryanair flight. Perhaps they’ve loosened the rules? If not, she’ll be cramming that trolley bag of hers...</p>	<p>[Voiceover] Mmm... Giulia sta per imbarcarsi su un volo Ryanair con due bagagli a mano. Hanno chiuso un occhio sul regolamento, oppure dovrà ficcare la borsa nel trolley?</p>	<p>[Voiceover] Mmm... Giulia is about to board a Ryanair flight with two pieces of hand luggage. Have they turned a blind eye to the rules, or will she have to shove the bag into the trolley?</p>
<p>[Super] Size restrictions apply.</p>	<p>[Super] Trasporto in cabina soggetto a limiti di dimensioni.</p>	<p>[Super] Transport in the cabin subject to size limits.</p>

<sup>6</sup> <https://youtu.be/DeWdCR9Cpeg> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

<sup>7</sup> <https://youtu.be/L4wZ9lxQe5E> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

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[Super] 2 <sup>ND</sup> CARRY-ON BAG FREE	[Super] SECONDO BAGAGLIO A MANO GRATIS	[Super] SECOND CARRY-ON BAG FOR FREE
[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW FARES. MADE SIMPLE.	[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW COST SENZA PENSIERI.	[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW COST WITHOUT WORRIES.

**Table 1.** Free second bag

<b>English<sup>8</sup></b>	<b>Italian<sup>9</sup></b>	<b>English back translation</b>
[Voiceover] So, here are the Johnsons about to board their Ryanair flight. Now, it could be the airline's relaxed things? Or there's a lot of elbow bashing ahead?	[Voiceover] Ma guarda... i Rossi che si imbarcano su un volo Ryanair. La compagnia aerea ha fatto uno strappo al regolamento... oppure li attende l'assalto al posto?	[Voiceover] Hey look... the Rossis boarding a Ryanair flight. Has the airline stretched the rules... or does a seat assault await them?

<sup>8</sup> <https://youtu.be/IxhVgenmz5w> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

<sup>9</sup> [https://youtu.be/dhBJ5\\_eiTCY](https://youtu.be/dhBJ5_eiTCY) (last accessed 1 September 2021)

[Super] NEW ALLOCATED SEATS	[Super] DA ORA TUTTI POSTI ASSEGNATI	[Super] STARTING NOW ALL ALLOCATED SEATS
[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW FARES. MADE SIMPLE.	[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW COST SENZA PENSIERI.	[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW COST WITHOUT WORRIES.

**Table 2.** Allocated seating

<b>English<sup>10</sup></b>	<b>Italian<sup>11</sup></b>	<b>English back translation</b>
[Voiceover] Now then, here's Dave, trying to book the family's Ryanair flights. He seems remarkably calm.	[Voiceover] Ma guarda... Davide che prenota un volo Ryanair per tutta la famiglia. Hanno snellito le procedure... oppure si è fatto una camomilla?	[Voiceover] Hey look... David booking a Ryanair flight for the whole family. Did they streamline procedures... or did he have a chamomile tea?

<sup>10</sup> <https://youtu.be/0vY0HwFAu0A> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

<sup>11</sup> [https://youtu.be/mW4ZKL\\_bvqM](https://youtu.be/mW4ZKL_bvqM) (last accessed 1 September 2021)

He must be on some form of muscle relaxant...		
[Super] NEW NO HASSLE WEBSITE	[Super] NUOVO SITO PIÙ FACILE DA USARE	[Super] NEW SITE EASIER TO USE
[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW FARES. MADE SIMPLE.	[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW COST SENZA PENSIERI.	[Tagline] RYANAIR LOW COST WITHOUT WORRIES.

**Table 3.** New website

#### 4.2. Voice casting

I have argued that transcreation professionals are expected to provide guidance as to the best route to take with the local adaptation of their advertisements. Like copywriters do when they create original copy, transcreation professionals usually deliver multiple transcreation options as well as comments to support their choices, so that clients can make informed choices. This is why I regard transcreation as a consulting service rather than a language service *strictu sensu*. But transcreation is a consulting service also because, in the case of TV or radio commercials, it may also include services like voice casting and voiceover (VO) directions – the latter of which will be discussed in 4.3 – where the transcreation professional is expected to give advice by taking a stand and expressing their opinions.

When a TV or radio commercial is adapted from one language to another, i.e. when the script is the result of a transcreation from a source language to a target language, the role of a transcreation professional in

voice casting and also VO directions is no different than the role played by a copywriter in the production of a TV or radio commercial they have originated. When I, as a copywriter, write a script for a TV or a radio commercial from scratch, I also have some say in selecting the right actors for the ad. By the same token, once I had my Italian transcreation of the three Ryanair TVC scripts signed off by the client, I helped with voice casting. The recording studio sent me the demo reels of a shortlist of voice talents they considered suitable for these TVCs based on the brief received from the client, and I was asked to confirm which talents I preferred. My number one choice was Marisa Della Pasqua, a member of ADAP (*Associazione Italiana Attori Doppiatori Pubblicitari*, the Italian association of advertising actors dubbers) whom I believed would best deliver my Italian script with the tone the client had in mind for the three Ryanair TVCs. Marisa was eventually hired to dub the ads into Italian, which in my opinion is a striking example of how the transcreation professional, i.e. the ‘translator + copywriter’, is not ‘just the translator’, and is ‘listened to’ rather than simply ‘used’.

#### 4.3. Voiceover direction

In a typical transcreation workflow for a TV or radio commercial, the final step would be voiceover direction. When the transcreation professional serves as VO director, their role is similar to a copywriter supervising the shooting of a TVC/the recording of a radio commercial.

When I, as a copywriter, write a script for a TV or a radio commercial, I also direct the actors to make sure they bring the script to life, delivering the lines the way I intended them. I carry out a similar task when the Italian script for a TV or radio commercial is not created from scratch, but is a transcreation instead.

After voice talent Marisa Della Pasqua was chosen for the three Ryanair TVCs, I served as VO director and supervised the recording session in the studio. In this role I took care of three main aspects:

- VO accuracy: I made sure the VO was recorded following the final version of the scripts approved by the client
- Synch points: I made sure the Italian VO lines started and finished at the right time to tie in with the different scenes in the film. Every time I adapt a TVC script, I obviously consider the length of the

original English VO lines and also read my transcreation aloud to ensure it fits the synch points. However, a script which has already been approved by the client may turn out to need some tweaking at recording stage if the VO talent realises some lines are too long to be delivered properly and may compromise the synch points. This is the reason why it is commonplace to have the transcreation professional attend the VO recording session, so they can tweak the script on the spot, if necessary. Although this was not the case with these specific Ryanair scripts, which were recorded exactly as approved by the client, tweaking the scripts in the recording studio in my capacity as a VO director has happened to me on a few occasions, also with scripts adapted by other transcreation professionals or by the client themselves.

- **Delivery:** While in the studio, I briefed Marisa on the intonation she was meant to achieve and provided feedback on her delivery. Subtle irony is a defining element of these three TVCs and the actress's voice had to convey it effectively. Voice talents usually provide multiple renditions of the same line, so that the client can pick their favourite. Therefore, once the session was over and I received the edits, I also made sure they contained the client's approved take for each line.

Although this example shows that the mixture of translation and copywriting I call transcreation truly is a consulting service, it goes without saying that familiarity with TVCs as a particular form of advertising is crucial to providing the full package (script transcreation + voice casting + VO direction) described above. That said, I am not suggesting that transcreation professionals with VO direction skills are hired to provide the full package for each and every Italian-version TV ad being broadcasted in my country. I am simply pointing out that it is rather common for transcreation agencies – not to mention direct clients – to hire me and fellow hybrid professionals (translators + copywriters) with such skills to perform such tasks. While it may be a relatively small niche, it certainly is a high-stakes one if we consider the great production and broadcast costs involved, and therefore should not be dismissed.



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## **5. Interpreter + Journalist: Media interpreting for the music industry**

Media interpreting is an umbrella term covering many different settings, from TV and radio shows to press conferences and face-to-face interviews. Academic literature has mainly focused on television interpreting (Mack 2002, Straniero 2007 and Castillo 2015, among others), and it has been noted that “there seems to be an increasing tendency towards a hybridisation of roles, with leading journalists and showmen/women acting (also) as interpreters, and professional interpreters becoming (also) primary communications partners” (Mack 2002: 205).

In this paper I will be covering consecutive interpreting performed in settings like press conferences/round tables and interviews with international music artists. The hybridisation described by Mack (2002) is clear in my line work, first and foremost because I myself am a hybrid: an interpreter who is also a journalist. Having attended that same kind of media meetings ‘on the other side of the fence’, i.e. as a music contributor, not only am I on familiar terms with many of the journalists attending the conferences I translate at, but I fully understand their workflows and expectations. This helps me provide an interpreting service that better suits their needs, as well as create a friendlier, more informal and more interactive environment. In my opinion, stepping outside of my role as an interpreter and performing tasks that traditionally are not the interpreter’s responsibility is essential to provide added value in this industry.

When an international music artist is about to release a new album, their PR team may want to promote it by organising a press conference or a round table (which is a smaller, more informal kind of meeting) as well as interviews (radio interviews, TV interviews, one-to-one interviews with the press etc). In these settings there are three different stakeholders: journalists/hosts, the artist and their PR team. In theory, they all work towards a common goal – great, compelling interviews. In practice, there are a number of factors affecting the chances of that happening.

In my experience, most journalists come to the interview, press conference or round table well prepared. However, not all of them may be experts on that particular artist or music genre. Moreover, while journalists writing for periodicals usually go through their notes, listen to the recording (a number of journalists record the meeting) and/or do further research before writing their articles, journalists writing for daily newspapers or news agencies do not have the luxury of time. Sometimes they have to submit

their pieces shortly after the interview or press conference/round table is over.

For journalists to write a proper article, the artist must be exhaustive and provide newsworthy material, but this is not always the case. Firstly, some artists may not be very articulate and great at speaking in public. If they are not able to express their thoughts in a clear and thorough way, journalists may have a hard time writing long, interesting features about them. An Italian music contributor once revealed to me that if an artist provides no ‘juice’, journalists resort to taking statements from previous English-language interviews publicly available online and integrating them into the articles they are writing – as if the artist had said those things during that very interview or press conference in Italy. Secondly, promoting an album in Italy often boils down to giving interviews non-stop for a couple of days, which results in the artist being tired and bored of answering the same questions over and over again. This means that the journalists whose interviews are scheduled later in the day may be somewhat penalised, as the artist may answer their questions listlessly. Thirdly, less seasoned artists may be somewhat intimidated by the scores of journalists surrounding them and not feel at ease during a press conference or round table. Again, this may influence their ability to come across as interesting and personable.

Another typical setting for me is radio shows, which in some ways pose different challenges compared to a press conference or a press interview. In my experience with commercial, non-all-news stations, radio shows are very fast-paced and hosts expect interpreters to translate very quickly, without following the usual turn-taking mechanism peculiar to consecutive interpreting as we know it. Moreover, in these situations, interpreters are often an integral part of the show – they are treated as co-stars and expected to not just translate, but to play the part as well.

Being a journalist myself and having also worked as a promotion manager at a concert agency before going freelance, I know how journalists, radio hosts, artists and PR teams work and feel. My knowledge of their *modus operandi* ultimately informs the choices I make when I interpret. In fact, I strongly believe I am hired not only to translate, but also to perform the tasks outlined in the next sections.

### 5.1. Facilitate a fruitful exchange between journalists and the artist

If I, ‘wearing my journalist hat’, feel that the answers given by the artist are not exhaustive enough, I may ask them to clarify or further elaborate. In

one particular case, when a young artist gave what I thought was too succinct a reply to a legitimate question, I asked him whether the answer was by any chance connected with something he had said earlier, during another interview. He confirmed and asked me to elaborate on his answer myself. In addition, there are cases where, if I notice the question asked by a journalist contains a factual error, I may politely let them know. This way they can rephrase it and give me the opportunity to translate the correct question into English for the artist. Although this behaviour of mine certainly is not desirable in all settings (think diplomatic interpreting), I am under the impression that journalists appreciate it, because it not only saves them a faux pas with the artist – who is usually a global superstar that can leave anyone in awe – but also allows them to obtain a more relevant and immediate answer from the artist and therefore saves precious time.

## 5.2. Provide newsworthy material

Because they are celebrities and/or because they are simply tired after many interviews, music artists tend to assume that journalists know everything about them (which, as mentioned earlier, may not always be the case). For this reason, their answers may not be fully understood unless I explicitly mention links between their utterances and the implied information and meanings. Especially if the artist is not very articulate, I might even go so far as to add tiny bits of information which pertain to such statements.

It is rather obvious that this requires in-depth knowledge of the subject matter. While I do have a background as a music journalist, I also tend to spend a considerable amount of time preparing for an interpreting assignment, striving to be on a par with the best-informed journalists in attendance. The artist's PR team is fully aware of this and in fact tends to treat me like an 'authority on the matter', telling journalists they can count on me for any information about the star. Besides, as a group of journalists and I were once waiting for Scottish singer-songwriter Lewis Capaldi to show up for a round table that would be shorter than originally announced, his publicist asked me to share anything interesting that had come up during the interviews I had translated in the morning. I decided to disclose the meaning behind the album title, and my role in unveiling it was acknowledged in one of the interviews that came out, although I was referred to as 'translator' instead of 'interpreter': "(...) *Divinely Uninspired To a Hellish Extent* è difficile anche solo da pronunciare – e da comprendere, se

a sillabarlo è il forte accento dei dintorni di Glasgow di Capaldi. Ad addentrarsi è la traduttrice che lo accompagna (...)”<sup>12</sup>.

### 5.3. Act as a gatekeeper

In some cases, journalists may be explicitly asked not to pose certain questions, and I as an interpreter may be instructed not to translate such questions, if they are posed nonetheless. Because I am also a journalist, however, I tend to honour this obligation within reason.

Before a round table with an artist promoting a solo project, his publicist told me not to translate any questions about the band he is a leader of. The rationale was clear to me: the artist was there to talk about his own album, not to reveal indiscretions about the one he would release with his group in the future. Although journalists were expressly asked to refrain from asking questions about the band right from the start, one of them mentioned one of the band’s albums, which was partly recorded in Italy, and asked him about the difference between creating a solo album and creating an album with his band. I felt that, phrased in those terms, it was a legitimate question, so I translated it and the artist happily replied. During an interview I later witnessed but was not requested to translate, another journalist reminisced about the last time the artist and his band had played at San Siro stadium. They repeatedly asked the artist about that very special night with his band, which caused the artist to angrily snap, and drive home the point that he was there to talk about his own album. This goes to show that not all ‘questions about the band’ are the same, and that acting as a gatekeeper as requested by clients must, in my humble opinion, be done in a mindful way.

### 5.4. Act as a ‘show-woman’ of sorts

In my experience, during a live radio show the interpreter is expected to come across as a real member of the team and not some outsider brought into the studio to translate. Before working on a show that featured three hosts and one artist, for example, I was literally instructed to ‘butt in’, because the pace would be so fast that hosts would not even let me speak. By speaking very quickly, I imitated the hosts’ delivery and therefore

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.rockol.it/news-706977/lewis-capaldi-fabrique-milano-concerti-intervista-someone-you-loved> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

blended in better with the show. Moreover, in my experience, the interpreter needs to be ready to crack jokes with hosts and guests, as well as be comfortable with becoming the butt of their jokes. A case in point is me being introduced as “the special needs teacher” (*l’insegnante di sostegno*) and being asked to not only translate the artist into Italian, but also to imitate the artist’s voice, just to make the show more fun<sup>13</sup>. The role shift from interpreter to multivariate mediator I experienced first-hand during that radio show seems to be a defining element of TV talkshow interpreting (Katan and Straniero Sergio 2001). As a matter of fact, a professional interpreter hired to translate *The Incredible Hulk* was also asked to mime the guest’s voice and gestures (*ibidem*).

To some extent, the need to ‘put on a great show’ also concerns press conferences and round tables. On the one hand, music artists understand that I am there to make them sound interesting and pleasant in my native language. This will ultimately impact their reputation and sales, therefore the more we appear to be a great team, the better. On the other hand, journalists love to see the person behind the persona, so they enjoy the moments when the artist interacts with me, because they can get a glimpse of his/her personality. British artist Noel Gallagher, for example, commented on my Italian rendition of his answers with a “Yes!” or “That’s it, correct!” for comic effect, as he obviously does not understand my language; this induced laughter among the journalists attending his press conference<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, Lewis Capaldi, who in spite of his origins does not understand my language either, praised my Italian rendition with a high-five that also amused the journalists<sup>15</sup>.

More recently, I was asked to be both the interpreter and the moderator at a round table with Essex band Nothing But Thieves, which was held online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was literally asked to perform a ‘one-woman show’ – I hosted a bilingual talkshow of sorts, with a dozen journalists as the audience. Three band members joined the Zoom meeting from three different locations, while Italian journalists had their webcams on but their microphones off. During this media conference:

- I introduced the band, first in Italian and then in English
- I broke the ice by asking the band a few preliminary questions (which the band’s PR team had shared with me before the meeting)

<sup>13</sup> <https://youtu.be/p-uWvCvhMpo> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

<sup>14</sup> <https://youtu.be/cXWIVVZ999E> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

<sup>15</sup> <https://youtu.be/AXKCKsSckWqM> (last accessed 1 September 2021)

- first in Italian and then in English, subsequently translating the band's answers from English into Italian
- I asked the band the questions that journalists had submitted to the PR team before the meeting, again first in Italian and then in English, subsequently translating the band's answers from English into Italian.

I cannot emphasise enough that these dynamics are unlikely to apply to other fields. Far be it from me to advise fellow interpreters to behave in the way I have described when they are interpreting for, say, a presidential candidate at a press conference or a virologist on a radio show – not least because those kinds of speakers would never behave like music artists in the first place. With this contribution I only mean to point out that, based on my experience so far, what I described is not ‘unorthodox’ in the music industry, and stakeholders seem to appreciate it because it helps them all. On closer observation, however, my behaviour appears to be peculiar to talkshow interpreting in general, where the interpreter is expected to manage or mediate between partners and take on a multivariate role (Katan and Straniero Sergio 2001). In a face-to-face meeting like a TV show, the traditional, clear-cut role of the consecutive interpreter pledging absolute loyalty to the source text is challenged by the ethics of entertainment. In this context, success is only possible if the interpreter works within their comfort zone, is able to perform in public, comfortable with being in the spotlight and respected as a professional participant, and behaves consistently with the specific context of television and national culture (*ibidem*).

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how a particular form of specialisation, which I call hybridisation, creates more value for clients than machines can.

Transcreation is a convention-defying practice because, in this field, breaking accepted norms provides added value, rather than something that should be sanctioned. While translation quality can be evaluated using traditional error categories such as omission, addition, wrong term etc., transcreation quality cannot be assessed based on objective criteria (Benetello 2018). CUBBITT may have made “significantly fewer errors in addition of meaning, omission of meaning, shift of meaning, other adequacy

errors, grammar and spelling” (Popel *et al.* 2020: 5) compared to human translation, but it takes a talented human to think outside the box and produce a target copy that truly resonates with the intended audience, as well as pick the right voice talent for a TVC and direct them in the recording studio.

In media interpreting for the music industry, “hybridisation forces me to become so visible that I become invisible as an interpreter and end up becoming something else – almost a co-host when interpreting for radio shows and a journalist/moderator when interpreting for press conferences and round tables”<sup>16</sup>. In my opinion, interpreters are not neutral, invisible conduits, but rather active, visible players essential to the success of an event (Downie 2016). Therefore, only by delivering a service that goes beyond interpreting as we know it can they serve stakeholders’ needs in a way no machine ever will.

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<sup>16</sup> Benetello, C. 2017. “A hybrid within a hybrid: the interpreter-journalist for the music industry: a professional’s perspective”, in *ICIQ: Third International Conference on Interpreting Quality, Granada 5-7 October 2017. Book of Abstracts*, p. 33-34 [http://qinv.ugr.es/icq3\\_boa.pdf](http://qinv.ugr.es/icq3_boa.pdf) (last accessed 1 September 2021)

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