Professional precariat or digital elite? - Workshop on interpreters' workflows and fees in the digital era

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Abstract

In today's digital and connected environment, it has become much easier to dissect services like interpretation into very small units. In some cases, interpreters working in micro units, i.e. within a limited space of information, may have a business case, in others, they operate in less restricted and predictable "macro" information space, having to recur to a wide range of secondary context, background and linguistic knowledge. Accordingly, payment can occur on micro and macro level, i.e. taking account or not of the secondary knowledge work involved in an assignment. Small payment units (minutes, or words) are not the most useful way of remunerating "informed" macro level knowledge work, but don't necessarily have to exclude it. Software and digital platforms might not only be the catalyst of small-piece contracting, it could also serve as a means to make interpreters' knowledge work more efficient and profitable, thus provide optimum quality and value for money to the customer.

1   Introduction

Interpreters being paid by the minute (or hour) nowadays does not seem as inconceivable as it used to be. Technically speaking, small worktime and payment units have become easier to handle, thus more probable to be applied. The question arises how to distinguish between micro and macro knowledge work and which working/payment units best to apply to suit the needs of both interpreters/translators and customers.

2   Knowledge Work

Interpreters and translators are knowledge workers constantly moving back and forth between different contexts, languages and conceptual systems. In order to do so, they rely on their own knowledge base being complemented by external information sources explored in what can be called "secondary knowledge work" in order to properly perform the actual, primary knowledge work, i.e. the interpreting assignment or translation at hand (Rütten 2007:102ff). Interpreters do so mainly during preparation and, to a limited extent, on the job when doing ad hoc research and after the job, while a translator's secondary knowledge work tends to be more intermittent and less clearly distinguishable from the primary task of translating.
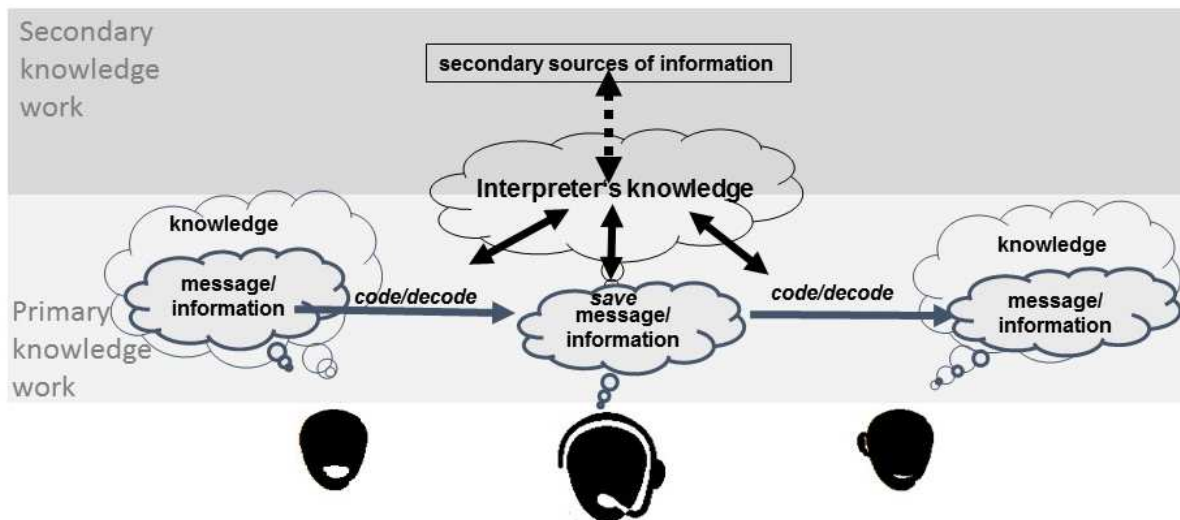
Figure 1: Primary and secondary knowledge work in interpreting

2.1 Macro Knowledge Work

What interpreters need to know in order to interpret a certain speech usually goes far beyond the text itself – both conceptually, linguistically and pragmatically. In a macro knowledge work scenario, they do indeed have this knowledge. Ideally even freelance interpreters are familiar with the broader context of a company or organisation and the respective industry, political framework etc., the technicalities as well as the language used in that environment. This makes them all-round language service providers taking care of anything ranging from translations (documentation, website, brochures, meeting documents, even short emails) and terminology to interpretation of meetings, sales events, negotiations and short phone calls – cooperating if need be with a team of freelance colleagues. Micro work elements – such as interpreting (or making) the said phone call, answering spontaneous terminological questions or translating single sentences – smoothly integrate into the macro level of long-term, relatively large-volume language service provision, there is no need for extensive secondary knowledge work in order to familiarise with the respective product, intentions of the persons involved and typical jargon, the background knowledge as a decisive production factor having been acquired (and financed) in the course of the long-term cooperation (Rütten, 2007:101ff). Primary and secondary knowledge work go hand in hand. In this scenario, a company may well draw from the extensive insight the interpreter or translator has and rely on their professional judgement and advice.

2.2 Micro Knowledge Work

Sometimes the cost and effort of recruiting a professional would by far exceed the benefit. This is the case when no context knowledge is required to fulfil the task or when quality simply does not pay off. If a customer lives off selling very cheap products and needs multilingual categorising or key word finding for tons of products just to feed the search engines, then less quality for less money is a business case. They may give thousands of words to a dozen translators and have them translated in no time, saving time and money by not investing in the meaningful translation of a text that, after all, has a very short life-expectancy.

When confidential matters are interpreted, like in medical or legal interpreting, the customer might rather prefer the interpreter not to accumulate vast knowledge about matters discussed or parties involved. Under certain circumstances context knowledge may even be a caveat

when, for example, unbiased and unprejudiced views are required by the customer and an informed interpreter might be prejudiced and render a pre-filtered version of what is being said on the basis of what he or she considers important or unimportant.

In the aforementioned cases, the idea –not only from the customer's, but sometimes also from an interpreter's point of view– might be to use a minimum input of secondary knowledge to fulfil the interpreting task at hand and make no effort to keep and maintain it, just like current assets in a factory, rather than seeing it as a necessary production factor to invest in and benefit from, be it once or repeatedly. In such cases, the benefit of having an informed interpreter who understands allusions and references to past events or persons not present is seemingly outweighed by the cost savings and/or other factors like confidentiality or impartiality. Although it should be mentioned that professional interpreters are bound by professional secrecy anyway, as it is stated for example in the AIIC Code of professional ethics (AIIC 2012).

In all these cases, secondary knowledge work as part of what Julia Böhm (2007) calls "job-specific time input" is deliberately kept to a minimum, thus cutting the usual overall time input for an interpreting assignment roughly by half. However, when this reduction of time input is merely about confidentiality or impartiality, it could be argued that, while leaving out all context information, the purely semantic dimension of preparation, i.e. special legal/medical knowledge, can (or should) still be part of the interpreter's background knowledge, be it that this knowledge is acquired especially for the assignment at hand or has been accumulated in earlier jobs or training. In this case, interpretation is a combination of micro and macro level work.

3   Payment Units

3.1   Macro Payment

When remuneration is based on larger units –like in the case of employees' monthly or annual salaries– the long-term benefit provided to the company or organisation by the employee based on their experience, training, soft skills etc. positively influences the amount being paid (macro payment). The largest usual payment unit for freelance interpreters is a day and for translators an hour (if not paid by the word or line). Without an in-depth survey it is hard to tell whether the knowledge acquired in the long run by the interpreter, as well as the time required for the secondary knowledge work dedicated to a special assignment, are factored in when these fees are calculated. Conference interpreters tend to argue that their daily fees include preparation. However, when analysing the typical cost structures, this often turns out not to be true (AIIC, 2015a).

Generally speaking, the larger the work volume the smaller will be the proportion of secondary knowledge work in relation to the primary task. This is due to a certain scale effect when working on a macro level, for the effort of familiarisation/knowledge acquisition can be allocated to a larger amount of work, i.e. a long and/or repeated assignment or the sum of translation plus interpreting plus any other minor linguistic support like phone calls and emails, provided that these tasks are in a way interrelated. A typical example would be interpreters having been present at meetings and translating documentation beforehand or the minutes afterwards and also interpreting the occasional phone call between the meeting participants. As they are familiar both with the subject matter and with the people involved, they will not have to prepare as much as someone unfamiliar and, more importantly, be able to compensate the loss of visual and contextual information on the phone and read (or hear) between the lines more easily.

Larger work volumes tend to be remunerated in larger payment units. Let's say a two-day interpreting assignment will hardly be paid by the hour, whereas this might be the case for a two-hour job, and a customer might tend to pay a fifty-minute job by the minute. However, if

a small one-off project involving a small amount of micro working units (minutes) is not embedded in a long term, macro-type of cooperation but "informed" interpreting on a macro level is still expected then macro payment will be more appropriate in order to account for the secondary knowledge work required. It does not necessarily have to be in big payment units as long as the preparation effort is factored in. However, this may be easier to factor into bigger payment units, as will be discussed more in detail under 3.2.

3.2   Micro Payment

In translation, payment in small units like words or lines (i.e. characters) has been common practice for a long time. In interpreting, it is becoming increasingly popular at least from the customer side what with Voice over IP and remote interpreting techniques. Crowd sourcing platforms offer a superb technical environment for assigning micro jobs and will be happy to inform crowd workers about their excessive pricing (without knowing their cost base) simply based on a comparison of prices indicated by their competitors. With smaller payment units, the focus may be reduced to mere primary knowledge work with the secondary knowledge work being lost out of sight and thus not being factored in both time-wise and financially. This may be a sensible thing to do for the reasons mentioned above–basically if the job at hand requires low qualification. It may, however, happen accidentally, i.e. when "informed" macro knowledge work is required and the additional effort of macro knowledge work is not assigned to the small payment units.

The idea of working and paying on a macro level while using small payment units may sound contradictory at first but it works perfectly well for many translators provided they do not calculate their fees on the basis of some words being typed away. The same goes for interpreting, which might even be charged by the minute as long as the scope of the calculation is not limited to the mere physical presence of the interpreting person. It may, however, be difficult to calculate if the number of minutes needed is unknown beforehand. If, for example, a price per minute were to be fixed for "over the phone" interpreting, this would have to vary in the extreme according to the number of minutes bought. If an interpreter prepares one hour for an assignment and needs to earn 80 EUR/hour worked in order to cover the costs (AIIC 2015a), then the prices charged for per minute of interpretation would have to be as follows:

preparation minutes	interpreting minutes	total minutes	total price (total minutes *1.33 EUR)	price per minute of interpreting
60	1	61	81.13 €	81.13 €
60	5	65	86.45 €	17.29 €
60	30	90	119.70 €	3.99 €
60	60	120	159.60 €	2.66 €
60	120	180	239.40 €	2.00 €

The principle (and difficulty) of calculating small unit prices and volume discounts while factoring in preparation time becomes quite clear. Any other factors like opportunity costs for a day blocked that might as well have been sold as a complete conference day or an extra pay for the special fatigue of phone interpreting have not been taken into account for the sake of simplicity.

4   The role of software

On the internet, any product and service can be found and recruited much easier than in the pre-internet era. Crowd sourcing and job platforms nowadays first and foremost facilitate the

search for and selection of interpreters and translators for both large and small jobs. This is an advantage in terms of speed and facility of recruitment, but the internet and digitalisation could do much more than that. The nice thing from a consumer perspective is that any odd niche product can be sold from anywhere in the world to anyone in the world. With interpreting jobs becoming ever more specialised (almost anyone speaks enough English to talk about the weather or ask for a spare blanket at the hotel reception), it would be a huge advantage to be able to track down exactly the "niche" interpreter with the right language combination and experience in exactly the required subject area, possibly even not too far away from where the service is needed. Customers and service providers could be matched much more efficiently and precisely than what used to do the yellow pages, taking full advantage of the merits of digitalisation. An interpreter who has heard about, say, otolaryngology before will be able to prepare for an assignment in maybe half the time a completely newbie would, thus provide higher quality interpretation, at much shorter notice if need be, being able to anticipate and make conclusions on the basis of knowledge acquired formerly (a long-term asset). If the internet were properly used to find exactly the right interpreter, the mutual benefit would be much higher than it is at the moment. Interpreters could specialise more easily and customers could benefit from long-term, in-depth cooperation both in terms of pricing and quality.

As to supporting interpreters' knowledge workflow, many applications have been developed recently (Rütten 2015). In contrast to translator's translation memory systems, which provide both financial benefit to the customer and boost efficiency in the translator's workflow, interpreters' knowledge management systems so far do indeed provide support for efficient macro knowledge work, but they are hardly ever used as a basis for long term cooperation with customers. Cloud-based team terminology work has become quite popular recently, but it tends to be a mere workload-sharing exercise in order to be able to keep up with the preparation of extremely dense and technical presentations at all. The resulting group discussions of conceptual or linguistic questions, which lead to better cognitive processing and a common understanding about the subject matter and language to be used within the team of interpreters, often come as a mere side effect. Customers tend to play a very minor role in this exercise.

5   Way forward

Increased price pressure and exchangeability of service providers are one side –the micro dimension– of digitalisation and the internet. Potential benefits of new technologies could be found rather on the macro level, like e.g. better "match-making", long-term cooperation and efficient knowledge management, possibly shared not only among interpreters, but also with customers.

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