



A survey of glossary practice of conference interpreters

An exploration of how professional interpreters compile, use and share glossaries. It turns out it's not all about words!

Hong JIANG.

Published: April 21, 2015 Last updated: December 2, 2015

I. Introduction

The glossary is considered an indispensable part of the practice of interpreting. It is probably safe to claim that all interpreters at some stage, if not all, of their training and professional life, have created glossaries in one form or another.

There are resources available on the glossary. From the profession of conference interpreting, AIIC offers on its website advice on many aspects of the glossary. In its [*Practical Guide for Professional Conference Interpreters*](#) (AIIC 2004), the “glossary preparation” section gives guidance on items to be included, sources of items, functions and formats, and the collegial practice of sharing, among others. There are also articles by interpreters on the tools and web resources that can be used for building glossaries (See Dawrant, Fons i Fleming, Rütten and Sand in *Communicate!* and Luccarelli 2006). In academic research, the glossary has been studied by various scholars, from both the perspective of terminology studies (e.g. Will 2007) and the cognitive approach (e.g. Gile 2002, Moser-Mercer 1992). However, there has not been an overall assessment about how the profession is actually dealing with this vital process of the practice. Do all interpreters prepare glossaries? What sources do they actually consult in their preparations and do these sources carry the same weight? With the advancement and application of IT tools and mobile gadgets, are interpreters dumping the good old paper medium? Are institutionally generated glossaries a valued reference for interpreters? Are there any differences in the glossary practices of staff and freelance interpreters? These questions are well worth exploring in order to discover or verify best practices for better service delivery and more effective guidance of students and new members of the profession.

II. The survey

1. Survey setup

To find answers to the questions mentioned above, among others, and to take stock of the actual glossary practice of conference interpreters, a survey was carried out by the author as a research project funded by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The survey was completed in 2010.

A questionnaire was sent out, using Survey Monkey, to more than 2,262 interpreters, including a vast majority of AICC members and some non-member professional interpreters. Among all respondents, 476 or 21% answered all questions and their responses were included in the data analysis. As can be seen in the respondents' profile, the highest values in the breakdown categories include: professionals trained at the MA level, with more than 15 years of practice, freelancers and female.

Table 1. *Profile of survey respondents*

Item	Response count	Percentage
Gender	476	Female 73.3%
		Male 26.7%
Job status	476	Freelance 87.4%
		Staff 12.6%
Training	476	Informal on-the-job training 13.9%
		BA 9.7%
Years of Practice	476	MA or equivalent 76.5%
		1-4 years 1.5%
		5-9 years 7.8%
		10-15 years 15.8%
		More than 15 years 75.0%

2. Survey questions and results

In the survey, 11 questions are explored:

Q1. Do you generate a glossary for your meetings?

Q2. What do you use your glossary for?

Q3. What items do you include in your glossaries?

Q4. What languages do you use in your glossaries?

Q5. What are the sources of your glossaries?

Q6. What medium do you use?

Q7. What format do you use?

Q8. Do you save your glossaries?

Q9. Do you edit your glossaries?

Q10. Do you use your existing glossaries?

Q11. Do you share your glossaries with colleagues?

The survey data for each question are shown in Tables 2 through 12, with the highest value in each category highlighted in bold.

Table 2. *Q1: Do you generate a glossary for your meetings?*

Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
Every meeting	25.6%	122
Most meetings (>50%)	42.6%	203
Only technical or unfamiliar ones	29.2%	139
Rarely	2.5%	12
Total response count		N = 476

Table 3. *Q2: What do you use your glossary for?*

Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
Learn vocabulary	81.3%	387
Learn about issues and concepts	64.9%	309
Get yourself in action mode	35.3%	168
Trigger output into target language	47.1%	224
Speed up output into target language	59.2%	282
Others (please specify)	13.2%	63

Table 4. *Q3: What items do you include in your glossaries?*

Answer options	Known and familiar	Known but not familiar	Not known before	Response count
Names and titles of people	17%	47%	62%	368
Names of organizations	28%	65%	72%	446
Acronyms	39%	70%	74%	468
Names of places	10%	34%	50%	304
Words and phrases	18%	51%	64%	394
Technical terms	33%	68%	76%	462
Numbers	8%	12%	16%	114
Others (please specify)				46

Table 5. *Q4: What language do you use in your glossaries?*

Answer options	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Response count
Source language	86.8%	11.1%	0.8%	470
Target language	89.5%	7.6%	0.2%	463
Others (please specify)				65

Table 6. *Q5: What are the sources for your glossaries?*

Answer options	Most useful	Generally useful	Sometimes useful	Not useful.	Response count
1. Conference documents: (a) Agenda	44.5%	37.0%	14.5%	0.6%	460
1. Conference documents: (b) Texts of presentations	71.0%	24.8%	3.4%	0.0%	472
1. Conference documents: (c) Information documents on agenda items	43.9%	39.7%	11.3%	0.6%	455
1. Conference documents: (d) Logistics documents: announcements, etc.	10.3%	18.1%	44.1%	15.3%	418
1. Conference documents: (e) Minutes of previous meetings	38.2%	35.1%	20.4%	0.2%	447
2. Other reading on the conference topics	22.5%	41.6%	28.8%	0.6%	445
3. Glossaries generated by institutions	28.6%	39.1%	27.3%	1.7%	460
4. Colleagues' voluntary suggestions	19.1%	46.4%	26.7%	1.7%	447
5. Asking colleagues	15.3%	36.6%	35.5%	1.9%	425
6. Heard from conference proceedings	27.3%	24.8%	27.3%	4.2%	398
7. Colleagues' performance	11.8%	34.0%	40.3%	2.9%	424
8. Experts/delegates	38.2%	29.4%	20.8%	1.5%	428
Other sources (please specify)					85

Table 7. *Q6: What medium do you use?*

Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
Notebook	43.5%	207
Loose paper	57.6%	274
Computer – Word	55.7%	265
Computer – Excel	27.3%	130
Computer - glossary software	15.1%	72
Others (please specify)		33

Table 8. *Q7: What format do you use?*

Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
Tables/lists with corresponding items in languages	93.7%	446
Highlighting on documents	43.3%	206
Ad-hoc handwriting on documents	51.5%	245
Others (please specify)		34

Table 9. *Q8: Do you save your glossaries?*

Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
Always	75.2%	358
Sometimes	22.7%	108
Rarely	2.1%	10
Response count		N = 476

Table 10. *Q9: Do you edit your glossaries?*

Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
During the conference	66.8%	318
After the conference	52.5%	250
No, I don't edit my glossaries.	15.3%	73

Table 11. *Q10: Do you use your existing glossaries?*

Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
Always	51.7%	246
Sometimes	44.7%	213
Always create new	3.6%	17
Response count		N = 476

Table 12. *Q11: Do you share your glossary with colleagues?*

Answer options	Response percentage	Response count
Never	1.3%	6
Voluntarily when I'm chief interpreter/team leader	16.0%	76
Voluntarily under all circumstances	47.3%	225
When requested by colleagues	46.2%	220
When exchanging with colleagues	31.3%	149

3. Analysis and discussion

As we can see from the survey results, the glossary has indeed proven to be a well-established practice for professional interpreters, with only 2.5% of the respondents rarely preparing one for assignments. "Technical or unfamiliar meetings" are shown to demand the most attention during the preparation stage; while nearly 30% of interpreters may not find it necessary to generate a glossary for other meetings, they do create one for this category of meetings.

The utility of the glossary depends on how much it contributes to performance in interpreting, especially in simultaneous interpreting, which is the topic of research of this survey. As can be seen from the responses to Q2 on the uses of the glossary, interpreters primarily use it as a means to "learn vocabulary" and to "learn about issues and concepts". This confirms the professional doctrine that interpreting is not just about words, but also about understanding the meaning. What is also noteworthy and interesting is that interpreters find the glossary an important tool for speeding up code-switching into the target language. This leads us to infer that "accessibility" of glossary items is of vital importance. However many items one may have entered in the glossary, they are only of use if they can be retrieved instantaneously from one's memory or spotted in one's glossary to meet the demands of instant real-time delivery.

The accessibility issue links up with Q6 and Q7 on the medium and format of the glossary. The overwhelming majority, over 90% of respondents, use "tables/lists with corresponding items in languages". These would include both the source language and target language items (See Table 5 on Q4). For interpreters with several languages in their language combination, this could mean several parallel columns for various languages. Microsoft Word takes the lead followed by Excel as the computer software used to organized glossary items, but "paper" beats them all in being the most popular medium. The data are not mutually exclusive, so it means that while many interpreters do use digital devices to prepare their glossaries, many also have kept using the paper medium. These include the use of notebooks, loose paper and handwriting and highlighting on documents. Some interpreters have kindly shared their paper-based glossaries with the author. Some Japanese colleagues, for example, would produce a one or two page paper-based glossary containing what they consider the most important entries for a particular conference, and rely on that for online consulting. Colour-coding, highlighting or the use of boldface are some additional devices used to make the items stand out. The reason is precisely that they can easily spot those items that are vital to the success of their performance. Multi-page comprehensive glossaries, while necessary for pre-meeting preparations, can be problematic when one has to flip through the pages either physically or digitally to find one particular item for real-time delivery. In conclusion, it seems that

interpreters use multiple media for the glossary. However, they also choose a particular medium for a particular stage in the interpreting job depending on the urgency of accessing a particular glossary item.

The preparation process for an interpreting task is also time-sensitive. Therefore, interpreters need to be effective in the use of time when preparing for delivery of service. Effectiveness demands prioritizing, with the most important and vital put on the top of the list. This can be clearly seen from the responses to Q5 on the "sources" for glossaries items. The most useful source is reported to be "texts of presentations", which give the most immediate reference to what is going to be delivered by the speakers. The sources that come in second and third in being "most useful" are the agenda and information documents on agenda items. These documents can help the reader establish an overview of the issues to be discussed and the background to these issues. The agenda also contains names and titles of people and organizations, which can break one's performance easily if not available but also facilitate one's performance greatly if provided. In most cases, the agenda and background information are available before a conference officially starts. In the absence of speakers' speech texts, it is the agenda and background information (that can be found by internet searches if not provided by conference organizer) that interpreters value most as sources and thus preparation for an assignment. This knowledge is both useful to interpreters and their clients. Interpreters, in particular new members of the profession, can be overwhelmed by the numerous conference documents or panic in the absence of speech texts. It seems that experienced interpreters prioritize in their research by consulting the agenda and background information related to agenda items to make their preparations more effective. Clients, for their part, should understand the importance of these documents to interpreters. It is highly desirable that conference documents, including any available reference material, be made available to interpreters in a timely fashion to facilitate their work and ultimately service the communications needs of the clients.

The glossary is also shown to have a long life cycle, which starts when interpreters begin the first research activity in preparation for an assignment. It takes shape gradually as entries begin to accumulate. Interpreters also sort and prioritize according to their own performance needs. The life of the glossary continues into the conference, as most interpreters continue to edit their glossaries during the conference (see Q9 in Table 10) by taking cues or references from colleagues, experts or delegates at the conference or actual conference proceedings, which are shown also as important sources for glossary items in responses to Q5 as contained in Table 6. The editing continues even after the conference (also Q9 in Table 10) and glossaries are saved for future reference when interpreters work for similar meetings or topics. A glossary, created, edited, saved and retrieved can be a long-term asset for the career of an interpreter.

A strong sense of professional solidarity and collaboration has also been found in the glossary practice of interpreters in the survey. Interpreters are ready to help each other under various circumstances and only 1.3% never shares glossaries with others. However, it is indeed the professional responsibility of each interpreter to be prepared for his/her assignments and performance. Outside assistance can only be of help peripherally.

4. Conclusion

The survey of professional interpreters on their glossary practice in relation to simultaneous interpreting is the first of its kind in the study of interpreting practice. It achieved a high response rate and the results can reflect the actual glossary practice vs. the guidelines of professional organizations such as AIIC. The results can be used to inform both practice, especially that of new members of the profession, and students who need to be trained in glossary practice in preparation for their future work.

References

- AIIC. (2004). Practical guide for professional conference interpreters. 2.2 Glossary preparation. <http://www.aiic.net/page/628>
- AIIC. (2012). Professional interpreters worldwide. About AIIC interpreters. <http://www.aiic.net/directories/interpreters>
- Cabré Castellví, M. T. (1999). *Terminology: Theory, methods and applications*, Juan C. Sager (Ed.) and Janet Ann DeCesaris (Trans.). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Cheung, A. K. (2001). Code-mixing and simultaneous interpretation training. *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 11, 57–62.
- Dawrant, A. (2000). Using the web for conference preparation. *Communicate!* [Online] June 2000. <http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm/page223>
- Ericsson, K. A. & Smith J. (1991). Prospects and limits of the study of expertise — an introduction. In K. A. Ericsson & J. Smith (Eds.), *Towards a general theory of expertise: Prospects and limits*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1–38.
- Fons i Fleming, M. (2009). Do your glossaries Excel? *Communicate!* [Online] Fall 2009. [/page/3315/do-your-glossaries-excel/lang/1](http://www.aiic.net/page/3315/do-your-glossaries-excel/lang/1)
- Gile, D. (1995). *Basic concepts and models for interpreter and translator training*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gile, D. (2002). The interpreter's preparation for technical conferences: Methodological questions in investigating the topic. *Conference Interpretation and Translation* 4 (2), 7–27.
- Gile, D. (2009). *Basic concepts and models for interpreter and translator training* (Rev. ed.). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Luccarelli, L. (2006). Conference preparation: What it is and how it could be taught. *Conference Interpretation and Translation* 8 (1), 3–26.
- Moser-Mercer, B. (1992). Banking on terminology — conference interpreters in the electronic age. *Meta* 37 (3), 507–522. OED. (1989).
- Oxford English dictionary*, second edition, online version September 2011. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79143>
- Proctor, R. W. & Vu, K. L. (2006). Laboratory studies of training, skill acquisition and retention of performance. In K. A. Ericsson, N. Charness, P. J. Feltovich & R. R. Hoffman (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 265–286.
- Rütten, A. (2003). Computer-based information management for conference interpreters or how will I make my computer act like an infallible information butler? In *Translating and the computer* 25. London: Aslib.
- Rütten, A. (2007). Web 2.0 for interpreters and other facets of knowledge management. *Communicate!* [Online] December 2007. <http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm/page2842>
- Sand, P. (2011). The new Interplex glossaries made fast and easy. *Communicate!* [Online] Winter 2011. <http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm/page3546>

Setton, R. (1999). *Simultaneous interpretation: A cognitive-pragmatic analysis*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Will, M. (2007). Terminology work for simultaneous interpreters in LSP conferences: Model and method. *MuTra 2007 — LSP translation scenarios: Conference proceedings, EU-High- Level Scientific Conference Series*. [Online]
http://www.euroconferences.info/proceedings/2007_Proceedings/2007_proceedings.html

This contribution was based on an original article titled “The interpreter's glossary in simultaneous interpreting - A survey”, published in the journal *Interpreting* (15:1, 2013; pp. 74–93). Please consult the article for full survey reports and discussions. The author would like to thank again all colleagues who contributed to this survey and to use this opportunity to share the major survey results with them.

About the author: Ms. **Hong JIANG** is an AIIC member based in Hong Kong. She has worked in the profession for many years, both as a freelancer and as a staff interpreter at the United Nations. She teaches consecutive and simultaneous interpreting at the MA programme in interpreting and translation, Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Her research interests include interpreter training and expertise development in interpreting.

Recommended citation format:

Hong JIANG. "A survey of glossary practice of conference interpreters". *aiic.net*. April 21, 2015. Accessed April 30, 2020. <<https://aiic.net/p/7151>>.