

# CONFERENCE INTERPRETATION: EXPECTATIONS OF DIFFERENT USER GROUPS

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## Quality of interpretation - professional standards

In order to ensure that their members meet high quality standards, professional organizations like AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence) have set up a screening system for admitting colleagues to the profession. Five sponsors, who must be experienced interpreters, must observe the applicant in an actual working situation. Besides, AIIC has a special committee for the admission and language classification of applicants (CACL) to process applications for membership.

Dejean le Féal (1990:155) describes AIIC quality standards as follows:

*While there may be minor individual differences among the standards each interpreter sets for himself, we all share common standards of what we consider to be professional interpretation. These standards can be summarized as follows: What our listeners receive through their earphones should produce the same effect on them as the original speech does on the speaker's audience. It should have the same cognitive content and be presented with equal clarity and precision in the same type of language. Its language and oratory quality should be at least on the same level as that of the original speech, if not better, given that we are professional communicators, while many speakers are not, and sometimes even have to express themselves in languages other than their own.*

The *Code d'Ethique professionnelle* requires all AIIC members to meet stringent quality criteria.

Article 3 stipulates:

*Les membres de l'Association s'interdisent d'accepter un engagement pour lequel ils ne seraient pas qualifiés. Par leur acceptation, ils apportent la garantie morale de la probité de leur prestation.*

## Situationality and communicative context

From the very beginning, conference interpreters emphasized the significant role played by the listener and by situational factors in interpreting. Herbert (1952:82 ff.) writes:

*It is quite clear that in a diplomatic conference the greatest attention should be paid to all the nuances of words, while in a gathering of scholars, technical accuracy will have greater importance; in a literary and artistic gathering, elegance of speech; and in a political assembly, forcefulness of expression. Similarly, the style and tone cannot be the same in a small group of three or four sitting round a table, in a committee room with a membership of twenty or fifty, and in a big public meeting where many thousands are gathered.*

Seleskovitch (1989:236) points out that interpretation should always be judged from the perspective of the listener and never as an end in itself.

Dejean le Féal (1990:155) concurs with her in saying that ... *our ultimate goal must obviously be to satisfy our audience.*

Snelling (1989:142) stresses that a target text must always be targeted upon a specific audience. *It is, therefore, necessary to involve, in the*

*interpretation equation, the audience and the specific quality of that audience.* This opinion is also shared by Chernov, a representative of the Soviet school, who writes, *the knowledge of the situational context of the communication being interpreted becomes critically important.* (Chernov 1985:172).

Thiéry (1990:41) stresses the need for situation analysis on the part of the interpreter who must always consider *who is talking to whom, to what purpose, and with what possible effect.*

### Earlier empirical studies

#### 1. Quality criteria assessment by conference interpreters

Bühler (1986) devised a questionnaire containing a total of 15 linguistic and extra-linguistic criteria and asked AIIIC interpreters to rate these criteria as to their relative importance in sponsoring candidates for AIIIC membership. For the purpose of her study she assumed that sponsors applied the same criteria to sponsoring a candidate as to a first class interpretation.

In trying to find criteria for the ideal interpreter, Bühler (1986:233) postulates that *... he/she is one who supplies an ideal interpretation in a given situation for a given purpose.* Following the train of thought of Reiss (1983), she holds that an interpretation is good if it serves its purpose and makes it clear that the ideal interpretation cannot be an absolute value.

Her conclusion, however, that *the criteria as discussed in this paper reflect the requirements of the user as well as fellow interpreter in a (hopefully) well-balanced mixture* (Bühler 1986:233) is something I cannot immediately subscribe to.

There is no certainty that the ratings given by a sample of AIIIC interpreters yield a true picture of user expectations. These can only be determined by asking the users themselves. In fact, such a survey might confirm Cartellieri's assumption that *very often, a good interpreter is two quite different people, being one thing to a conference participant and another to a colleague.* (Cartellieri 1983:213).

Besides, it may be suspected that different user groups attribute different weight to different criteria. Thus, one should preferably not speak of the user but should differentiate between different

audiences.

Gile (1989) describes different types of multilingual events (big scientific and technical congresses, seminars, working sessions and plenary meetings of international organizations, parliamentary debates, media events, press conferences, dinner speeches, etc.), which are likely to involve different user expectations and requirements, and concludes:

*...peut-être convient-il de considérer l'interprétation non plus comme un système fermé, mais comme un service auxiliaire orienté vers des destinataires extérieures, dont les besoins et les attentes ne correspondent pas nécessairement à la définition que donnent les interprètes à leur activité. ...En tout état de cause, il nous semble que pour avoir une vision plus complète de l'interprétation de conférence, il ne faut plus se cantonner dans un nombrilisme interpréto-centrique, mais étudier également les délégués, leur environnement et leur besoins.* (Gile 1989:25 f.)

Stenzl (1983:31) notes with regret that with the exception of a study by Gerver (1972), who compared the audience's comprehension and recall in consecutive and simultaneous interpretation, *... we have only anecdotal and impressionistic indications of what conference delegates expect from interpreters and how satisfied they are with the service they receive.*

#### 2. Quality criteria assessment by delegates

A first empirical study designed to test Bühler's hypothesis that the criteria AIIIC members take into consideration when evaluating the performance of candidates for membership also reflect user expectations was carried out by Kurz (1988).

Delegates to a medical conference were asked to rate the first eight criteria in Bühler's questionnaire as to their significance for the quality of interpretation. It was found that some of the criteria which members of the interpreting profession considered highly important, such as native accent, pleasant voice, and correct usage of grammar, were given much lower ratings by the end users participating in this study.

In addition to this first study by Kurz, there are

two further investigations in which delegates were asked about the quality criteria they applied to interpretation.

For her paper at the University of Trieste, Meak (1990) used a questionnaire to determine the attitude of ten Italian medical experts representing different disciplines (cardiology, urology, pediatrics, clinical pathology, pharmacology, etc.) towards a number of criteria relevant for the quality of interpretation.

Gile (1990) carried out a case study on the occasion of an ophthalmological conference, asking delegates to assess the quality of the interpretation provided at that conference by rating the following criteria on a five-point scale: 1. general quality of interpretation, 2. linguistic output quality, 3. terminological usage, 4. fidelity, 5. quality of voice and delivery, 6. main deficiencies in interpretation.

One of Gile's findings was that, as in the study by Kurz, quality of voice was considered less important by the respondents in his sample than by the interpreters in Bühler's survey. He ventures the following hypothesis:

*Il est possible ... de formuler l'hypothèse selon laquelle les scientifiques (et techniciens) seraient moins sensibles à la qualité de la voix, du rythme et de l'intonation de l'interprétation que d'autres publics, pour qui elle a peut-être une plus grande importance. (Gile 1990:68)*

The first empirical investigations among conference participants showed that not all the AIIC evaluation standards (in Bühler's study) correlated highly with user expectations. Of course, it should be borne in mind that these results, which were obtained in a specific setting, cannot be generalized. It may be expected that different groups of end users have different expectations and needs. In order to test this hypothesis, a comparative study involving different groups of users was carried out.

### **Expectations of different user groups - a comparative study**

#### **Subjects and method**

A bilingual (English/German) questionnaire was administered using the first eight of Bühler's quality criteria in order to ensure comparability

with her study among AIIC interpreters.

Subjects were asked to rate the following criteria - 1. native accent, 2. pleasant voice, 3. fluency of delivery, 4. logical cohesion of utterance, 5. sense consistency with original message, 6. completeness of interpretation, 7. correct grammatical usage, 8. use of correct terminology - in terms of their significance for the quality of interpretation on a four-point scale.

Three different groups of listeners were examined.

The first survey was carried out on the occasion of an international conference on general medicine (cf. Kurz 1988). Forty-seven completed questionnaires were obtained.

The second study was performed in September 1989 among the participants in an international conference on quality control and yielded 29 completed questionnaires.

The third survey was conducted in 1989 during a Council of Europe meeting on equivalences in Europe. A total of 48 completed questionnaires was obtained.

The answers given by these three user groups were compared with those of the AIIC interpreters in Bühler's study.

The study was designed to answer the following questions:

Is there a difference in the ratings of the above-listed quality criteria by conference interpreters on the one hand and delegates on the other hand?

Do different groups of users rate the individual quality criteria differently or do they all share the same expectations with regard to high-quality interpretation?

Can the alleged importance of situationality and communicative context in conference interpreting be empirically verified?

It can be seen that interpreters gave higher overall ratings ( $X = 3.44$ ) than the three other groups. The second-highest ratings ( $X = 3.06$ ) were given by the Council of Europe (CE) delegates. Medical doctors (MDs) gave an average rating of  $X = 3.0$ , and engineers (i.e. the participants in the quality control conference) gave the lowest ratings ( $X = 2.8$ )

The combined ratings of the individual criteria by the four groups are illustrated in Fig. 1.

**Discussion of results**

Table 1 shows the significance attributed to the different criteria by the four groups of subjects.

Criterion	Int. N = 47	MDS N = 47	Eng. N = 29	CE N = 48	avg.
1. native accent	2,9	2,3	2,2	2,08	2,365
2. pleasant voice	3,085	2,6	2,4	2,396	2,6
3. fluency of delivery	3,468	2,9	2,966	3,208	3,1
4. logical cohesion	3,8	3,6	3,1	3,3	3,458
5. sense consistency	3,957	3,6	3,655	3,6	3,69
6. completeness of interpretation	3,426	3,0	2,9	3,458	3,2
7. correct gramm. usage	3,38	2,4	2,03	2,688	2,6
8. use of correct terminology	3,489	3,4	3,138	3,729	3,4
average	3,44	3,0	2,8	3,06	3,06

Table 1: Assessment of quality criteria for interpretation by four different groups

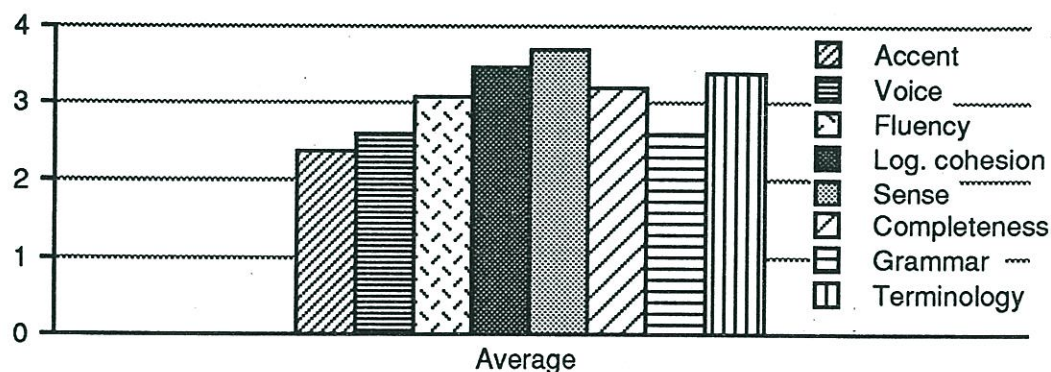


Fig. 1: Combined ratings of quality criteria

*Sense consistency with original message* (criterion 5) was felt to be the most important quality criterion and received an average rating of 3.69. *Logical cohesion of utterance* (criterion 4) ranked second ( $X = 3.458$ ). It was followed by *use of correct terminology* (criterion 8) with an

average rating of 3.44. *Completeness of interpretation* (criterion 6) and *fluency of delivery* (criterion 3) received ratings of 3.2 and 3.1, resp. *Correct grammatical usage* (criterion 7) and *pleasant voice* (criterion 2) were given an average rating of 2.6 only. *Native accent* (criterion 1)

ranked lowest with an average rating of 2.365. ratings of the individual criteria by the four Figs. 2 and 3 illustrate the differences in the groups.

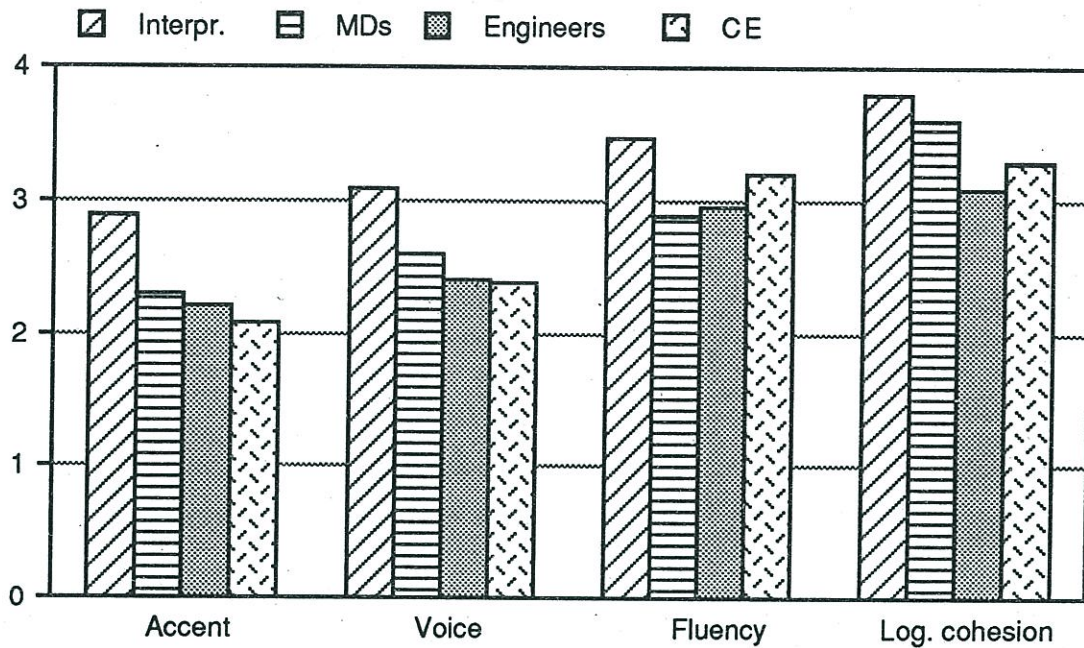


Fig. 2: Quality criteria ratings by four different groups

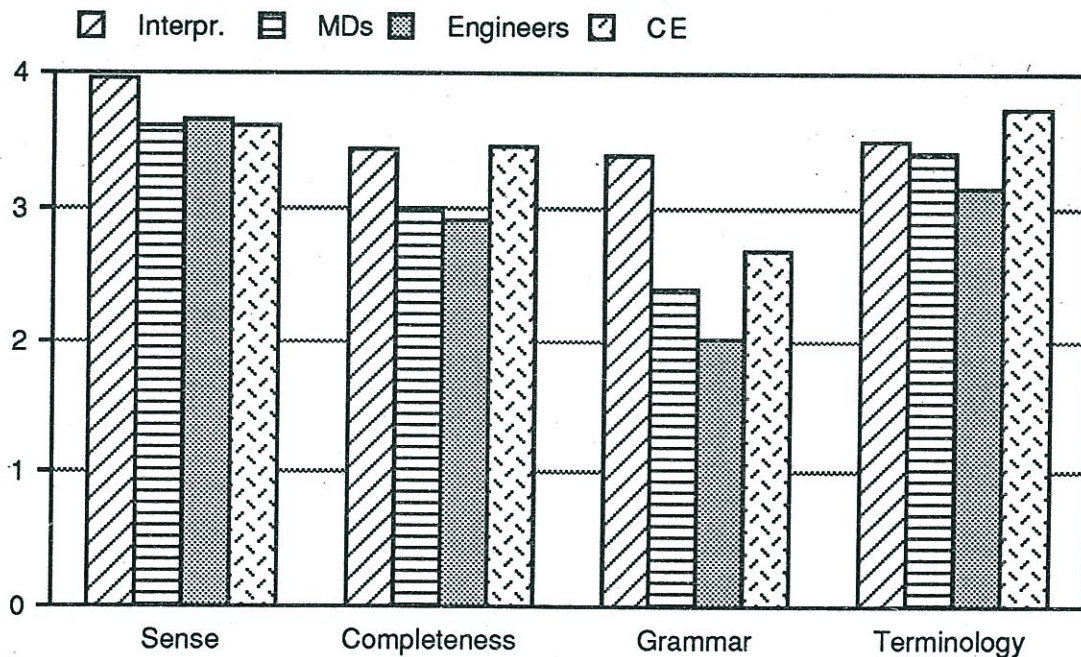


Fig. 3: Quality criteria ratings by four different groups

In the following, the eight criteria will be discussed in the order of their average significance.

*Sense consistency with original message* (criterion 5)

Sense consistency with the original message

was given a uniformly high rating. With the exception of CE delegates, who ranked criterion 8 (correct terminology) even higher, all groups considered sense consistency with the original message the single most important criterion, giving it the following ratings: Interpreters: 3.957; MDs: 3.6; Engineers: 3.655; CE delegates: 3.6.

These results confirm the theory of Seleskovitch/Lederer (1989:37):

*Il s'agit en interprétation de faire comprendre dans une langue la même réalité que celle qui a été désignée dans une première langue - réalité que nous appelons sens.*

#### Logical cohesion of utterance (criterion 4)

Overall, logical cohesion was regarded as the second most important criterion. However, the ratings given by the four groups differed more widely than they did for sense consistency. MDs considered this criterion to be equally important to sense consistency ( $X = 3.6$ ). Engineers ranked logical cohesion third behind sense consistency and correct terminology ( $X = 3.1$ ). CE delegates gave this criterion a rating of 3.3, ranking it in fourth place (after use of correct terminology, sense consistency with original message, and completeness of interpretation).

Logical cohesion more or less corresponds to the standard of coherence in the school of text linguistics of Beaugrande/Dressler (1986:6), who claim that "a text does not make sense by itself" but that sense is attained by the interaction of the knowledge present in the text-receiver's stored knowledge of the world.

Seleskovitch (1986:39) in this context speaks of *compléments cognitifs*, i.e. *les connaissances qui s'ajoutent aux significations des mots*.

In general, listeners will be willing to complement discontinuities in the text by bringing in their own world knowledge, and reduced coherence will be tolerated as long as it does not interfere with communication.

The higher degree of tolerance among engineers towards reduced coherence might perhaps be due to the fact that technical papers are very often supported by the presentation of graphic illustrations, tables, charts, etc., which makes it easier for the listeners to maintain coherence.

A possible explanation as to why participants in the Council of Europe conference ranked logical cohesion of utterance only in fourth place may be the specific character of meetings of international organizations, which Gile (1989:30) describes as follows:

*En général, ces réunions ne comportent pas un flux informationnel unilatéral comme les grandes conférences scientifiques et techniques... mais une discussion sur un*

*ensemble d'éléments précis, souvent présentés sommairement à l'avance par le secrétariat de la réunion dans des documents envoyés aux participants... L'information ayant été partiellement présentée par écrit et assimilée préalablement à la réunion, les flux d'information en séance sont moins denses et se composent essentiellement de questions, d'explications complémentaires et de commentaires plutôt que d'informations entièrement nouvelles.*

It seems that, since spontaneous contributions rather than lengthy prepared (and read) papers tend to prevail in those meetings, the demand for coherence is less stringent. Minor discontinuities frequently go unnoticed, and listeners normally exercise greater tolerance and supply additional material from their own stored knowledge whenever necessary.

#### Use of correct terminology (criterion 8)

In the combined ratings of all groups, use of correct terminology ranked third. A somewhat unexpected result was the fact that participants in the Council of Europe meeting considered correct terminology to be the most important criterion ( $X = 3.729$ ). Interpreters and medical doctors ranked this criterion third with ratings of 3.489 and 3.4, resp. Engineers ranked correct terminology second ( $X = 3.138$ ).

At a first glance, the finding that CE delegates attributed greater weight to the use of correct terminology than medical doctors and engineers is indeed surprising. One might expect the use of correct terminology to play a more important role in medical or scientific conferences.

On the other hand, it has to be borne in mind that, as pointed out previously, the meetings of international organizations are very often devoted to a discussion of documents which delegates have had time to study in advance. Consequently, they are used to a specific terminology which they expect to be hearing during the conference as well. An outsider might not see a big difference between a *committee* and a *commission*, a *president* or a *chairman*. For participants to whom their organization's terminology has almost become second nature, however, it obviously does make a difference. They expect the interpreter to use the technical jargon they are used to and seem to be less tolerant towards any deviations in this respect.

*Completeness of interpretation* (criterion 6)

On average, completeness of interpretation was ranked fourth. CE delegates and interpreters attributed almost identical ratings to this criterion (3.458 and 3.426, resp.). Medical doctors and engineers gave it somewhat lower ratings (3.0 and 2.9, resp.)

These results were not all too surprising since, according to Gile's typology of conferences, scientific conferences are frequently characterized by high information density, and participants' interests tend to be highly selective:

*L'information présentée à ces conférences est abondante et dense. Il en résulte que même pour des participants dotés de pouvoirs de concentration et d'assimilation très supérieurs à la moyenne, elle ne peut être appréhendée dans sa totalité en séance, surtout quand il s'agit de formules, de dérivations et de démonstrations mathématiques, de diagrammes complexes. Les délégués saisissent plutôt, en écoutant l'orateur, les grandes lignes de son intervention et certains détails qui présentent pour eux un intérêt particulier. (Gile 1989:27)*

This may explain why medical doctors and engineers ranked completeness of interpretation fourth and fifth only. One might venture to say that, if they had a choice, they would opt for an intelligent, logical, terminologically correct summary of the original.

Stenzl (1983:29 f.) argues along similar lines:

*...a clear and intelligible text with some information loss may be more useful to the audience than a target text that aims at completeness at the cost of clarity and intelligibility. And not every item of information is equally important to the listener.*

In addition, one might argue that, as mentioned above, the frequent use of graphic illustrations, diagrams and tables in scientific conferences facilitates understanding on the part of the audience.

The participants in the Council of Europe meeting may have attributed greater relevance to the completeness of interpretation because to them an exchange of information and experience with their fellow conferees constitutes an important aim of the conference. This requires full understanding of the arguments with all their nuances. If details or nuances are omitted in the interpretation, precise

comprehension of the argument advanced by another delegate may be impaired.

Besides, it should be added that many participants in the meetings of international organizations are able to understand one or more foreign languages. For them, interpretation is not a necessity but a welcome service. Sometimes they will listen to the interpretation because they expect to get the details and nuances which they might miss when listening to the original. If these expectations are not met, these delegates might prefer to rely on their own, even though imperfect, knowledge of foreign languages. This might be one of the reasons why the CE delegates in this study attributed such great significance to completeness of interpretation.

*Fluency of delivery* (criterion 3)

In the combined ratings, fluency of delivery was ranked fifth (Interpreters: 3.468; CE delegates: 3.2; Engineers: 2.966; MDs: 2.9).

Here, too, situational factors obviously played a significant role. A possible explanation as to why the Council of Europe delegates participating in this study attributed greater weight to fluency of delivery than medical doctors and engineers may be that they were primarily interested in a lively discussion. A halting interpretation with frequent hesitations, pauses, and an irregular, unnatural rhythm would probably have been regarded as an impairment to a spontaneous exchange of information and experience.

The medical doctors and engineers in this study obviously showed more willingness to apply the "charity principle" (cf. Bühler 1990:541) to fluency of delivery, provided that the criteria of sense consistency, logical cohesion and use of correct terminology are observed.

It may be expected that in other situations - e.g. when interpreting for the media - listeners will rank fluency of delivery higher.

*Correct grammatical usage* (criterion 6)

The ratings given to this criterion by the four groups differed considerably. While interpreters attributed a fairly high rating ( $X = 3.38$ ), delegates considered this quality criterion to be much less important (CE delegates: 2.688; MDs: 2.4; Engineers: 2.03). The engineers in this study regarded correct grammatical usage as the least important criterion.

Correct grammatical usage is closely related with the textuality standard of cohesion

(Beaugrande/Dressler 1986:3), which concerns "the ways in which the components of the surface text, i.e. the actual words we hear or see, are mutually connected within a sequence". Cohesion rests upon grammatical dependencies and syntactic surface structures. A violation of the rules of grammar - a regular feature of spoken language - does not necessarily impair comprehension of a text. Seleskovitch (1986:236) rightly asks: *...what is correct grammatical usage and how significant are minor grammatical errors in an interpretation?* Minor grammatical errors, such as wrong articles or wrong prepositions, sometimes even go unnoticed by the listener.

Moreover, for spoken texts, subsidiary cohesive systems, such as intonation and stress (prosodic features), are available: *Les traits prosodiques transmettent le sens que l'écriture doit analyser en mots et en style, et le ton compense souvent le manque de propriété des termes* (Lederer 1985:28).

It should be pointed out that these findings were obtained from English- and German-speaking delegates. It may very well be that the members of other language groups, e.g. the French, attribute greater weight to correct grammatical usage. Similarly, this criterion may play a more important role in other situations, such as interpreting for radio and television.

#### *Pleasant voice* (criterion 2)

Even though interpreters ranked pleasant voice in second-last place, they gave it a rating of 3.085. The three user groups investigated in this study gave significantly lower ratings (MDs: 2.6; Engineers: 2.4; CE delegates: 2.396).

This finding corresponds to the results of Gile's survey (1990), in which the interpreters' voice did not have a great influence on the overall assessment of their interpreting performance.

#### *Native accent* (criterion 1)

Native accent was considered to be the least important quality criterion in the combined ratings (Interpreters: 2.9; MDs: 2.3; Engineers: 2.2; CE delegates: 2.08).

Bühler (1986:233) assumed that, as delegates do not normally know the original, *[they] are ... likely to judge the quality of interpretation by such superficial criteria as native accent, pleasant voice, and fluency of delivery*. This assumption could not be confirmed in the present study. On the contrary, all three examined user groups gave a

lower rating to this criterion than the AIIC interpreters participating in Bühler's study.

Again, it is quite possible that in other situations - particularly in media interpreting, where the interpreter's presentation is judged against that of the TV moderator or newsreader (cf. Daly 1984; Kurz 1984) - listeners will consider pleasant voice and native accent more important quality criteria.

#### Conclusions

By way of summary it can be said that this study among three different user groups yielded different evaluation profiles. While there was fairly high agreement by all groups on the importance of some of the criteria, conference interpreters and users as well as different user groups among themselves differed in their assessment of other criteria. The demands on the quality of interpretation expressed by the AIIC interpreters in Bühler's survey were generally higher than those obtained from the delegates participating in the present investigation.

The findings confirm the validity of the theories that view translation and interpretation as an intercultural communication process and emphasize *the importance of situationality and communicative context* (cf. Reiss/Vermeer 1984). They clearly show that the target-language receiver or listener must be seen as an essential element in the process. As Seleskovitch (1986:236) points out, *the chain of communication does not end in the booth*.

It would be interesting to conduct similar studies among other groups of end users so as to develop a broader base of observational data.

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