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Church Interpreting in Evangelical Churches with Russian-Language Services

This article is a summary of studies conducted in 2015-2017 (Peremota, 2015, 2017).

Christianity has undeniably influenced translation and interpreting history and theory throughout the ages. Likewise, interpreting has been and increasingly is an inalienable part of church life in our global society. Still, church interpreting seems to be a largely understudied topic.

On one hand, there is a growing interest in studying different settings of interpreting, including interpreting in church. On the other hand, pastors and church administrators (as interpreting commissioners) often admit a dire need in professional church interpreters. However, there is very scarce empirical base outlaying the demands imposed on church interpreters, and to author's knowledge no such base exists in the specific setting chosen for this study.

The author of this article, a church interpreter of 25 years, had been interested in “putting on the map” the field of her experience, church interpreting in Evangelical churches with Russian-language services, and creating a portrait of an “ideal” church interpreter based on users' expectations.

The research was started in 2015 with a pilot survey and continued in 2017. Overall, the data of 258 respondents from 146 churches, 24 countries (111 cities) were gathered using an online questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of statistical data, open-ended questions, and closed questions. The closed questions were formulated based on two existing surveys (Moser, 1996; Shin, 2013) and author's personal experience.

The questionnaire was distributed through social networks (mostly Facebook). As there was no sampling procedure, i.e. participation was based purely on the willingness of people to take part in the Survey, and also due to the fact, that the greatest percentage of respondents was concentrated in two churches (28.3%), and in one of the branches of Evangelical churches – Charismatic movement (69.4%), the author understands that the data of the survey cannot be

validated as statistically representing the whole population of Evangelical churches with Russian-language services.

However, the answers to open-ended questions were most useful in getting to know the setting from the respondents' point of view and for mining the criteria that interest the users of church interpreting. Therefore, the author assigned the leading role in the analysis to the answers to open-ended questions and used the answers to closed questions as supporting statistical material.

In the open-ended questions, the respondents were asked to define good and bad church interpreting and to provide the criteria of eligibility of a church interpreter. Their answers amounted to 80 pages of essay-like text. The author labeled every phrase with an approximate category name, then analysed the text within categories and subdivided it further. Thus, the whole text was divided into 12 categories, each containing numerous criteria described in respondents' own words (see Table 1).

Table 1 List of categories of criteria of a good church interpreter

1.	Faithfulness
2.	Congruence/Invisibility and Expressivity
3.	Linguistic competence
4.	Fluency
5.	Background knowledge
6.	Communication Skills
7.	Spirituality
8.	Attitude and personal traits
9.	Speech apparatus and sound equipment
10.	Aspects of professionalism
11.	Appearance, gender, and age
12.	Cultural mediation and explanation

Every criterion had dominant descriptions and outliers. The author compared the dominant descriptions with the answers to closed questions, and based on the result of this analysis created a portrait of an "ideal church interpreter", provided here below.

Ideal church interpreter:

- is a highly-intelligent, well-rounded person with broad outlook and a very deep knowledge of the Bible, church doctrine, Christian realia, terminology, and local church context;
- is confident, gregarious, and outgoing; has charisma and great sense of humour; thanks to empathy, is able to establish a rapport with the preacher and the audience; holds the

audience's attention through eye contact, rhetorical devices, and artistic qualities; is fearless and composed in any interpreting situation; is flexible and resourceful enough, to find a solution;

- is a qualified professional with significant experience in interpreting religious meetings; has well-developed interpreting skills; constantly learns, as well as prepares for every meeting;
- knows both source and target language cultures, foreign and local church context, traditions, and etiquette; is able to mediate communication, briefly explaining unclear realia or concepts, but not substituting personal opinion for interpreting;
- interprets coherently and in a grammatically correct literary language (preferably native) with rich vocabulary, and without filler words or sounds; constantly works on personal linguistic growth, reading a lot and increasing vocabulary in all the different levels of both languages; can understand and transfer the meaning of various figures of speech, idioms, and jokes;
- transfers a message that mirrors the original in all its entirety, preserving full meaning and details; does it in a clear and understandable way, without any calques or intervention of personal bias;
- delivers the interpretation fast, without pauses or interruptions, and with clear turn-taking, infrequently asking for clarification of unclear notions, to transfer the undistorted meaning;
- clearly enunciates the words without any accent or speech defect; speaks in a pleasant, well-projected voice of low or medium pitch and skilfully uses the sound equipment;
- becomes invisible by naturally imitating the preacher in body, soul, and spirit, either with the same or slightly decreased intensity, never being monotone or outshining the preacher;
- ideally is of the same gender and age as the preacher (however, the quality of the interpreting is more important); is clean and tidy, and follows the dress-code recommended by the customers;
- is aware of the assistant role, humble, and respectful; loves interpreting and is passionately involved in the meeting and the message; is a pleasant, loving, and positive person with a Christian character and excellent work qualities and ethics.

- is a genuine dedicated believer led by the Holy Spirit; is called to this ministry by God and performs it under the anointing, speaking the living Word together with the preacher.

Most of these statements might also describe an ideal secular interpreter, depending on the setting. There are some categories of criteria, however, that differentiate church interpreting, only these will be mentioned in this summary.

Congruence and Invisibility

Interpreter’s and translator’s invisibility is a largely discussed topic in Interpreting Studies. It is the approach to invisibility that differentiates church interpreting described by the respondents of this survey.

Based on the data received from the respondents, most of them want the interpreter to be invisible or unnoticeable, so that they would be under the impression that they listen to the speaker in their own native language. But how this invisibility is achieved is quite a different story. The main way to be invisible is to be congruent. Most respondents believe congruence consists in active mirroring of the preacher, as if the interpreter were the preacher’s “clone”. Thus, people do not notice the interpreters, because they are the preachers’ reflection. Fewer respondents believe the invisibility is achieved by echoing the preacher in a softer, weaker manner. Only very few others insist on interpreter’s neutrality as a way to achieve invisibility.

In answering the question: “What is an invisible interpreter for you? (What allows you to entirely plunge into the sermon, and feel like you are listening to the preacher in your native language, and not to the interpreter?), 85% chose the option “When the interpreter corresponds to the preacher in every way, being fully engaged (same emotions, same behaviour...), then it feels like listening to the preacher himself/herself (see Figure 1).

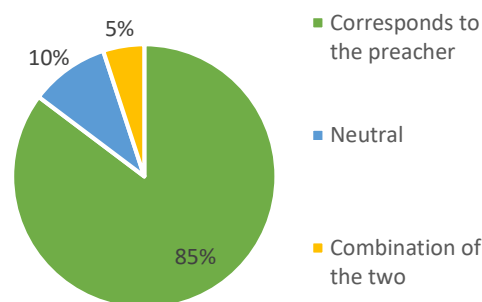


Figure 1 **What is an invisible interpreter**

When asked whether the interpreter should imitate the preacher, 8% answered simply “yes”, and 84% answered “Yes, provided that it looks natural” (see Figure 2).

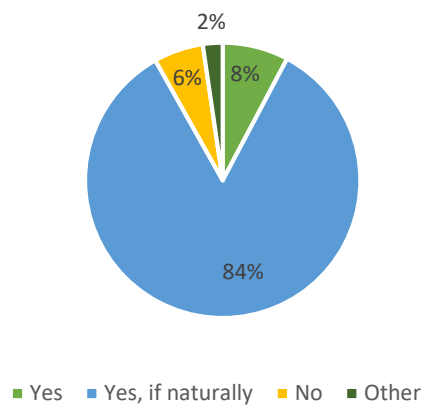


Figure 2 Should the interpreter imitate the preacher?

Whatever their approach to invisibility, the respondents’ answers could be subdivided into three subcategories: *body*, *soul*, and *spirit*. The first two subcategories – body (movements, gestures, volume of the voice etc.) and soul (emotions, intonation etc.) are well known and studied in secular interpreting, but the third – spirit subcategory (anointing, atmosphere, flowing in the spirit etc.), though a difficult one to explain to a non-church person, is, however, very important, which leads us to another category of criteria that differentiates church interpreting.

Spirituality

34.5% of respondents spontaneously mentioned some aspect of spirituality in their answers to open-ended questions, starting from the most general level – a requirement for the interpreter to be a Christian or a believer, and moving on to spiritual maturity, personal relationship with God, and ministering under the anointing.

The answers to closed questions only confirmed the importance of this criteria, with 93% of the respondents insisting that church interpreter must be a Christian (see Figure 3).

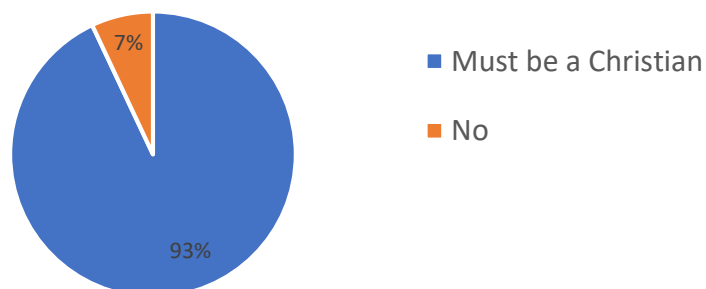


Figure 3 Must church interpreter be a Christian?

When asked to explain the reason for assigning such significance to interpreter's spirituality, besides obvious background knowledge issue, the respondents emphasized interpreter's emotional involvement, but most importantly the sacredness and supernaturalness of the church service.

A sermon is not a simple speech, it is a sacred act. And both the preacher and the interpreter are God's messengers that do not transfer simple words, they speak the living Word of God that has the power of the Holy Spirit upon it to touch hearts and transform lives. Thus, the interpreter, in this case, is a priest, who has to be a "vessel" of the Holy Spirit, be "led" by Him, to not speak empty words, but to transfer the deepest meaning and the spiritual component of the sermon. "But without faith it is impossible to please" God (Bible, Hebrews 11:6); therefore, an unbeliever, denying God inside, not knowing Him personally, cannot be a channel for His Spirit and will only transfer words void of the power of God, which will defy the whole meaning of the sacred act.

Attitude and Personal Traits

The respondents also pay great attention to interpreter's attitude and character. It is not enough for the interpreter to simply behave tactfully; a genuine respect and heartfelt involvement are expected, as well as true Christian character. This is obviously connected to the requirement for the interpreter to have the qualification of the "priest". Interpreter's personal traits are described in great detail.

Limitations

As mentioned before, the respondents mostly represented the Charismatic movement; and the portrait of an ideal church interpreter painted in this paper cannot be generalized for all the different Evangelical churches. Therefore, the author also provided a list of all the identified categories and criteria with their respective evaluation in the closed questions for any church interpreter to use it as a checklist in finding out the preferences of their local church (see Appendix 1).

This article is only a brief summary of the results of this research, the full study (including the questionnaire, the statistical data, the answers to closed questions, and the full analysis of the answers to open-ended questions within all the categories of criteria) is freely accessible online (see the References).

References

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Appendix 1: Church Interpreter's Checklist

Number of Respondents	Categories and Subcategories	Rating in Closed Questions
183	Faithfulness	unbiased interpreting: 4.69 vitally important; precise meaning: 4.57 vitally important; clarity: 4.57 vitally important; completeness: 4.41 important
162	Congruence	imitation: 2.46 noticeable/influencing perception, 92%: should imitate (84%: if natural); body: 2 noticeable; 62%: walk with the preacher; emotions: 4.07 important; intonation: 2.71 influences perception, 80% - same as preacher's; spirit: 4.25 important
147	Linguistic competence	4.46 important/vitally important; grammar: 3.95 important; difficulties (jokes): 3.64 important; coherence: 4.26 important; register: 3.83 important; Filler sound/words negative: 2.66 influence perception
143	Identical imitation	2.46 noticeable/influencing perception, 92%: should imitate (84%: if natural)
136	Fluency	2.7 influences perception; self-correcting: 3.97 important; ask for clarification: 3.25 desirable
121	Precise meaning	4.57 important
120	Background knowledge	Bible: 4.17 important; Field-specific knowledge: 2.86 moderately important; Terminology: 4.09 and 3.8 important
115	Communication skills	confident voice and eye contact: 3.9 important; confidence and freedom: 3.88 important; eye contact: 2.28 noticeable; empathy: 3.97 important; rapport: 3.65 important; tell preacher about misspeaking: 2.34 permissible; correcting this misspeaking, by immediately interpreting right: 2.57 desirable; artistic qualities: 3.28 moderately important
109	Soul congruence	emotional 4.07 important; intonational 2.71 influences perception, 80% same as preacher's
89	Spirituality	Personal faith and spirituality: 3.96 important; Calling: 4.03 important; Taking part in the service: 3.49 moderately important/important; Be a Christian: 93%; Position in church: 2.43 of little importance
82	Expressivity	
76	Invisibility	3.88 important, 85% invisibility=congruence
75	Speech rate	2.7 influences perception
75	Biblical knowledge	4.17 important; quotes 4.33 important; explain versions 3.71 important / 2.36 permissible to interpret from the source language
71	Spiritual congruence	4.25 important
69	Enunciation	2.69 influences perception
63	Attitude	passionate attitude: 4.03 important; respect: 3.97 important; servant's heart: 3.58 important; involvement: 3.49 moderately important/important
62	Emotional congruence	4.07 important
62	Appearance	2.38 noticeable; mostly tidy and inconspicuous and ask the host church for dress-code advice
57	Personal traits	confidentiality: 4.32 important; responsibility, trustworthiness: 4.25 important; character: 3.6 important
51	Body congruence	2.0 noticeable, 62% walking yes
49	Clarity	4.57 important
48	Not monotone	
47	Intonational congruence	2.71 influences perception, 80% same as preacher's
47	Experience, reputation and professionalism	
46	Vocabulary	
45	Field-specific knowledge	2.86 moderately important
44	Unbiased interpreting	4.69 important
44	Interruptions (37 negative, 7 positive)	self-correcting 3.97 important; ask for clarification 3.25 desirable
44	Voice	confident voice: 3.9 important;

		voice quality: 2.58 influences perception; 32% - low pitch
43	More intensive imitation - negative	
41	Skills	interpreting skills: 4.06 important
38	Pauses	2.7 influences perception
38	Spiritual person	personal faith and spirituality: 3.96 important participation in spiritual acts: 3.49 moderately important/important
35	Grammar	3.95 important
34	Confidence	confident voice: 3.9 important; confidence: 3.88 important
34	Believer	Christian 93% (241)
33	Other aspects of soul congruence	
32	Cultural mediation and explanation	knowledge of local and foreign culture: 3.4 moderately important; explanation of cultural phenomena: 3.5 moderately important/important; explanation (2.56), minor addition (2.52), reformulation (2.55) of cultural phenomena: permissible/desirable
30	Literal interpreting - negative	
30	Behaviour	
29	General knowledge	
28	Humility	
27	Difficulties in interpreting	jokes: 3.64 important
27	Sociability	
26	Personal relationship with the Holy Spirit	
25	Pleasant personality	
24	Completeness of rendition	4.41 important
23	Reaction to situations	
22	Knowing the interpreter's role/ humility	
20	Freedom and openness	freedom: 3.88 important
18	Confusion	
18	Taking turns	
18	Terminology	4.09 important (Christian), 3.8 important (other)
18	involvement	
17	Sense of humour	
17	empathy	3.97 important
17	Work qualities	
16	Behaving differently from the preacher - negative	
16	Coherence	4.26 important
16	Rapport	3.65 important
16	Attitude towards the speaker	
16	Good impression	
13	Register	3.83 important
13	Love for work	
13	Preparation	26% provide preparation materials
12	Filler words and sounds	2.66 influences perception
12	Absence of fear	
12	Composure	
12	Public speaking skills/rhetoric	
12	Artistic skills	3.28 moderately important
11	Stage presence	
11	Flexibility and resourcefulness	
11	Mature Christian	
11	Anointing	Flowing in it: 3.88 important
11	Christian Character	
10	Positive attitude	
9	Dialled down imitation	
9	Sound equipment	Microphone skills: 2.47 noticeable/influencing
8	Spiritual experience	
7	Passion for the message	
7	Respect and love	
7	Gender	92% not important
5	Eye contact	3.9 important 2.28 noticeable, but not influential
5	Position in church	2.43 of little importance, 82% congregant is enough
5	Calling	4.03 important
5	Accent	2.17 noticeable
3	Listening skills	
0	Age	88% not important