

## Follow-ups and interpreter-mediated discourse

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### Abstract

This paper is part of ongoing research into the role of translation and interpreting in political discourse. It illustrates what effects interpreter-mediated discourse can have on role construction and on the positioning of politicians. The data come from international press conferences and interviews. It is argued that multiple and multilingual data reveal the complexity of follow-ups in interpreter-mediated encounters. The paper also illustrates how further recontextualisation processes which occur in the transfer of press conferences to news reports result in additional shifts in the positioning of politicians.

## 1 Introduction

In analysing dialogic interaction, follow-ups have often been described as the third part of the exchange, as initially proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). That is, a speaker A, who had initiated an exchange, reacts to the response of speaker B, thus positioning him- or herself towards prior talk. In her analysis of media interviews, Weizman (2008) has shown that follow-up moves also contribute to the positioning of the participants. In the dialogic interaction of an interview, a “complex system of interactional and social roles and identities is established through negotiations” (Weizman 2008: 3).

Political interviews, however, may also be mediated by an interpreter, which makes the interview a triadic exchange (Mason 2001). In structural terms, the answer given by the interviewee also constitutes the third part of the exchange (interviewer – interpreter – interviewee). In a wide sense, the interpreter’s rendering of the question initiated by the interviewer, can also be described as a reactive move, with the interviewee, strictly speaking, responding to the interpreter’s words. The active role of the interpreter as the third partner in an interview will also have to be taken into account for analysing speaker positioning and role construction. The whole interaction thus becomes much more complex and leads to the following research questions:

1. What are consequences of interpreter-mediated encounters for our understanding of follow-ups (who follows up on whom and what)?

2. What are the consequences of interpreter-mediated encounters for the construction of interactional and social roles and identities and for positioning of participants (who positions whom and how)?

3. What happens in further recontextualisation processes (from the discursive event to reporting in mass media) in respect of identity construction?

In this paper, I will illustrate the effects interpreter-mediated discourse can have on the positioning of politicians. The data come from interviews with politicians and from international press conferences. The concept of follow-ups will be used in a wider sense, combining structural aspects and thematic relations of the exchange. That is, I will look at how specific topics are developed through complex interchanges. I will also use the concept of follow-ups for relationships between interviews and/or press conferences and subsequent news reports about these discursive events. It will be briefly illustrated how such recontextualisation processes result in additional shifts in the positioning and thus the construction of politicians.

The data set for the analysis of such interpreter-mediated encounters between politicians and journalists include multilingual written transcripts and video recordings. This paper will illustrate how the use of such multiple data can reveal otherwise hidden interaction strategies.

## **2 Positioning the other's social and interactional roles**

Weizman (2008: 16) states that “positioning involves assignment, shaping and negotiations of reciprocal relations between all parties involved in the interaction.” In the interaction, participants can be positioned in respect of their social roles (i.e. their roles outside the interaction itself) and their interactional roles (i.e. roles and obligations in the specific interaction). In the extract below, both types of roles are modified in an interpreter-mediated press conference.

The example is taken from a joint press conference between the French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, held on 6 February 2012 in Paris. Reading the extract on the website of the German government (1a), we may wonder why the French President starts answering a question addressed to him with commenting on Merkel's opinion. Moreover, by stating that Merkel shares his own opinion (‘... ist Frau Merkel genau wie ich der Ansicht...’), he also positions her in a somewhat subordinate social role. By

starting her turn after Sarkozy's long answer with confirming her agreement to Sarkozy's words, Merkel also positions herself in relation to her French counterpart, cf. (emphasis in all examples mine):

(1a) Frage: Herr Präsident, Sie haben es schon angesprochen: Die Griechenland-Krise spitzt sich wieder bedrohlich zu. Sie haben gesagt, dass [...] Wie stellen Sie sich die weiteren Tage vor, wenn Griechenland sich weiter Zeit auserbittet?

P Sarkozy: Zunächst einmal ist Frau Merkel genau wie ich der Ansicht, dass man sich noch nie so nahe war, was eine Einigung anbelangt, was die Privatgläubiger als auch die öffentlichen Gläubiger anbelangt. Niemals waren wir einer Einigung so nahe. Aber die Bundeskanzlerin hat recht, wenn sie sagt: Wir müssen zum Abschluss kommen. [...]

BK'in Merkel: Ich stimme dem vollkommen zu. Ich will noch einmal sagen: [...]

(<http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2012/02/2012-02-06-merkel-sarkozy.html?nn=74446>)

Merkel's discursive move can be interpreted as a follow-up in terms of content (she is taking up the topic). Her 'dem' and 'Ich will noch einmal sagen' are discourse markers which establish coherence to Sarkozy's prior statements. When we compare this German transcript to the French one published on the website of the French government (1b), a somewhat different picture emerges. We notice that the journalist initially addressed both Sarkozy and Merkel, referring to something both of them had said ('comme vous le disiez') before addressing Sarkozy individually and asking him specific questions. The video accessible from the French website shows that there was a moment of uncertainty as to who should start answering, with Merkel explicitly problematising addressee identification, cf.:

(1b) **QUESTION** -- Monsieur le Président, Madame la Chancelière, comme vous le disiez, la crise grecque menace à nouveau. Monsieur le Président de la République, vous avez dit que [...] comment imaginez-vous la période à venir si la Grèce essaye encore de gagner du temps?

**MME ANGELA MERKEL** -- Je crois que la question était adressée au président de la République... Ah, c'était à nous deux ? Ah bon, d'accord. Alors que le Président commence.

**LE PRÉSIDENT** -- Bon, d'abord, Madame MERKEL comme moi, nous pensons que les éléments de l'accord n'ont jamais été aussi proches. Jamais. Que ce soit pour les créanciers privés que pour les créanciers publics. Jamais nous n'avons été aussi proches d'un accord. Mais la Chancelière a raison, il faut conclure. [...]

**MME ANGELA MERKEL** -- Je me rallie totalement à ces propos. Je le répète, [...]

(<http://www.elysee.fr/president/les-actualites/conferences-de-presse/2012/conference-de-presse-conjointe-de-nicolas-sarkozy.12958.html>)

What becomes obvious in the French transcript is a complex negotiation of interactional roles. Since Merkel passes on the speaking right to Sarkozy ('Alors que le Président commence'), Sarkozy's reference to shared opinion ('Bon, d'abord, Madame Merkel comme moi ...') can be characterised as a discursive marker ensuring coherence to the beginning of the question

and also as reinforcement. The negotiation of interactional roles, however, goes hand in hand with a positioning of social roles. Merkel passing on the speaking right to Sarkozy, and Sarkozy stressing commonality in opinion could also be seen as Merkel positioning Sarkozy in a subordinate role which Sarkozy does not challenge (note also the ‘nous pensons’).

A comparison of transcripts can thus lead to different interpretations of the exchange. When we watch the video on the French website we cannot hear Merkel’s own voice, only the simultaneous interpreting into French. Equally, we cannot hear the voice of the interpreter who interpreted the French utterances simultaneously into German for Merkel. That is, a comparison of the spoken and the written texts can only be done for the French parts. It is not possible to state with absolute certainty whether the German version of Sarkozy’s words is the result of subsequent translation or a transcript of the interpreter’s words. The French and German versions of Sarkozy’s turn reveal differences in syntactic structure and emphasis (e.g. the three occurrences of ‘jamais’).

The German transcript is not a complete transcript of the press conference and has undergone some editing. The nature of such editing processes is different for various countries. The transcripts of press conferences made available on the website of the US government are normally complete transcripts and also record laughter. The edited transcripts on the website of the German government, however, reflect deletions and grammatical and stylistic enhancements. Such transformations in the recontextualisation from the spoken text at the actual discursive event to the written text made available on a website are evidence of different institutional practices which, in turn, are determined by institutional and ideological values. Whereas for the US administration, orality and spontaneity seem to be highly valued, the German government officials give more attention to the political message and less to the style of delivery (for more examples see Schäffner 2009, 2012).

This example showed more or less subtle differences between the original words of a politician and the interpreter’s (or translator’s) rendering, and also additional transformations which happen in subsequent recontextualisation processes in making transcripts available on websites. The next section will illustrate how the very practice of interpreting can function in positioning and identity construction of politicians.

### 3. (De)Constructing a politician

The example is a press conference which US President Obama held on 19 January 2011 in Washington with President Hu of the People's Republic of China. At this event, the interpreting provision is much more complex, and becomes obvious only when watching the video. Simultaneous interpreting was provided for the initial statements by the two politicians. Then the question-answer sessions starts, and the transcript on the White House website (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/19/press-conference-president-obama-and-president-hu-peoples-republic-china>) presents the following first question, which was asked by Ben Feller of Associated Press.

(2a) Q Thank you very much. I'd like to address both leaders, if I may. President Obama, [...] I'd like to follow up specifically on your comments about human rights. Can you explain to the American people how the United States can be so allied with a country that is known for treating its people so poorly, for using censorship and force to repress its people? Do you have any confidence that as a result of this visit that will change? [...].  
And, President Hu, I'd like to give you a chance to respond to this issue of human rights. How do you justify China's record, and do you think that's any of the business of the American people?

The journalist explicitly mentions 'follow up' in his turn, and specifies the topic to which it is related (human rights). However, it is not only a case of a content-based follow-up, but the follow-up can also be seen as force-based and implicature-based (see Fetzer 2012), in particular in the questions addressed to President Hu. The journalist challenges Hu ('How do you justify China's record ...'), with 'record' implying all the negative aspects listed before ('treating its people so poorly', 'censorship', 'repress its people'). The transcript then continues as follows:

(2b) PRESIDENT OBAMA: First of all, [...] Let me address the other issue, and a very serious issue [...] But that doesn't prevent us from cooperating in these other critical areas. (311 words in total)  
I apologize. I thought we had simultaneous translation there. So I would have broken up the answer into smaller bites.

Q (Speaking in Chinese.)

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I'm sorry, I'm getting it in Chinese.

Q I'm from China Central Television. [...] So, President Hu Jintao, I would like to ask you the question, [...] So I would like to ask President Obama [...]

PRESIDENT HU: (As translated.) I would like to take this question from the lady journalist. I think that the exchanges between our two peoples represent the basis and the driving force behind the growth of our relationship [...] (389 words in total)

The transcript on its own seems somewhat incoherent: why would Obama finish a statement with an apology? Why is there a reference to Chinese? Why would Hu start his turn with accepting a question which had already been asked? When we watch the video, the sequence of the communicative acts appears somewhat different. Obama gives a relatively long answer to a first question asked by the American journalist which ends with ‘[...] these other critical areas.’ At this stage, we hear somebody speaking in Chinese, and a few seconds later we hear a voice-over from another speaker informing us in English that ‘The question in translated’. At the end of the interpreter’s utterances in Chinese, there is a short pause, and it is here that Obama says ‘I apologize. [...]’, acknowledging problems with the interpreting provision. Obviously the simultaneous interpreting had stopped after the statements, which also explains Obama’s next comment ‘I’m getting it in Chinese’. The video shows him putting on the headphones again, but the question by the Chinese journalist was only subsequently interpreted into English in the consecutive mode. The sentence ‘I would like to take this question from the lady journalist’ by President Hu was also uttered before she actually asked the question.

The whole press conference then continues with consecutive interpreting, both for the politicians’ answers and the journalists’ questions, which makes the whole event rather long. The next question asked by the journalist Hans Nichols from Bloomberg, can again be analysed as a follow-up, both content-based and force-based. It refers back to the first question in terms of the topic (human rights), and challenges Hu in an even more forceful way by accusing him of having avoided answering the question when it was first asked, cf.:

(2c) Q Thank you, Mr. President, President Hu. President Obama, with your respect and permission, because of the translation questions, could I direct one first to President Hu?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Of course.

Q Thank you.

President Hu, first off, my colleague asked you a question about human rights, which you did not answer. I was wondering if we could get an answer to that question. [...]

PRESIDENT HU: (As translated.) First, I would like to clarify, because of the technical translation and interpretation problem, I did not hear the question about the human rights. What I know was that he was asking a question directed at President Obama. As you raise this question, and I heard the question properly, certainly I’m in a position to answer that question. [...]

In structural terms, the follow-up does not take the third position since another question had been asked before, and it is also not the same speaker who produces a follow-up but another one. In this case, the journalist produces a follow-up not in order to challenge or to evaluate a response by a politician, but in order to elicit a response which had been expected in this specific discursive event but had not been given. We can say that the traditional exchange structure Initiation - Response - Follow-up is rearranged to Initiation (the initial question by Ben Feller, which in itself is phrased as a follow-up to a topic addressed in the prior statements) – Follow-up (by Hans Nichols) – Response (the answer by President Hu). Moreover, Hu's response is preceded by speech acts of justification. We need to bear in mind, however, that Nichols' follow-up was interpreted consecutively into Chinese, that Hu's response was in Chinese, and what we read in the transcript in English are the interpreter's words.

We can also see in extract (2c) that interpreting itself becomes the topic of the exchange, and it is used as a reason by Hu to reject the accusatory challenge of the journalist's follow-up. We can say that the positioning of President Hu is largely determined by the follow-up question by Nichols, which can also be characterised as a face-threatening act, and confirms the observation by Clayman and Heritage (2002) that journalists have become less deferential and more aggressive in questioning politicians. In his interactional role, he is positioned as unresponsive and un-cooperative, and in his social role he is positioned as a less credible politician. This positioning of President Hu as unresponsive and lacking in credibility was enhanced further by the mass media. Journalists add evaluative comments concerning Hu's interactional strategies and thus his behaviour, including non-verbal behaviour ('laughed', 'held a palm up and smiled'). The following examples from a blog (3) and an article in *The Washington Post* (4) are illustrating this.

(3) [...] Asked by a US reporter about human rights, Obama gave a lengthy reply but Hu embarrassingly refused to answer.

Later at the press conference, another US reporter asked Hu why he had not answered the human rights question. Hu laughed and blamed a problem in translation, saying he had not realised the question was aimed at him, but he would now answer it.

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/richard-adams-blog/2011/jan/19/hu-jintao-china-barack-obama-live>)

(4) [...] the Associated Press's Ben Feller rose and asked a gutsy, forceful question. [...] Obama answered. The translator translated. All eyes turned to Hu - who said nothing. Instead, he looked to a woman from China Central Television [...]

But the next questioner, Bloomberg's Hans Nichols, gave Hu a lesson in press freedoms. "First off, my colleague asked you a question about human rights which you did not answer," the lanky newsman advised the Chinese strongman. "I was wondering if we could get an answer to that question."

[...] During the translation of Nichols's question, Hu held a palm up and smiled, as if he couldn't see what all the fuss was about. "Because of the technical translation and interpretation problem, I did not hear the question about the human rights," he explained - falsely, as it turns out.

(<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/19/AR2011011905552.html>)

Again, the direct quotes by President Hu incorporated in English in these reports are actually the voice of the interpreter. In any case, by including extracts from press conferences as direct quotes and further elaborating on topics, these mass media reports too function as follow-ups in the wider sense. They can be characterised as discursive events (communicative acts) which accept, or reject, or challenge (parts of) prior discursive events. In this way, recontextualisation of a prior event in a new setting can reinforce existing ideological opinions and values (see also Hodges 2008 on the politics of recontextualisation).

The final example of interpreter-mediated interaction will illustrate another aspect of follow-ups as related to institutional practices and values.

#### **4 Institutional power**

The example is a TV interview which the well known CNN journalist Larry King conducted with the then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and aired on 1 Dec 2010. The interview was conducted via satellite, with King situated in the CNN studio in Washington and Putin in a room in Moscow, in front of a TV set. Putin was answering King's questions in Russian, and simultaneous interpreting into English was provided, with the interpreter speaking with a heavy Russian accent and not very fluently. The video was available via YouTube, but it cannot be accessed anymore. However, the interview can also be accessed from the Russian prime minister's website (<http://premier.gov.ru>), where we find transcripts in both Russian and English (the English one on <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/13147/>), and a video in Russian, that is, we hear Putin's words in Russian and Russian interpreting of King's questions. The website of the Voice of Russia (<http://english.ruvr.ru/2010/12/02/36107249.html>) provides a transcript of the interview in English, with the addition 'as provided by the Russian prime minister's website'. From this website, it is possible to watch a news report in which a journalist based in the studio in Moscow is talking in English with another reporter based in Washington, and extracts from the interview are incorporated. Here again, simultaneous interpreting of Putin's words into

English is provided. However, this time another interpreter is used, who is also speaking with a Russian accent, but much more fluently. This gives the impression that this recording was redone at a later stage.

When we compare the transcripts of the interview on the CNN website (which is preceded by the sentence ‘This is a rush transcript. This copy may not be in its final form and may be updated.’ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1012/01/lk1.01.html>) to those on the Russian websites mentioned above, we also note differences. Moreover, when we listen to the re-recorded interpreting from the Voice of Russia website and at the same time read the transcript provided there, we also notice discrepancies between the written and the spoken word. All these differences point to institutional practices, and they are particularly striking in respect of follow-ups and interaction management. The transcript on the CNN website is a record of the complete interaction, and thus also includes the following:

(5a) KING: We will be right back with the prime minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin. We'll ask about the situation on the Korean Peninsula right after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

KING: We're back with Vladimir Putin, the Prime Minister of Russia [...] What, Mr. Prime minister, is your assessment of the Korean Peninsula? [...]

King's turn after the commercial break can be treated as a content-based follow-up in that it returns to the theme announced in his prior turn. Later on in the interview, we encounter a similar situation, cf.:

(5b) KING: Will you -- will -- will you go to Zurich to make a personal appeal?

PUTIN Well, I've been reflecting on that. [...] I've been enjoying –

KING: All right, we'll be right back...

PUTIN -- the sport through all my life. I love soccer.

KING: All right, let me get a break on time. We'll be right back with more of the prime minister following this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

KING: Something, Mr. Prime Minister, I don't think you've ever been asked. We have quite a dispute about it in America. What is the Russian policy toward gays and lesbians in your military?

PUTIN Well, I'd like to finalize my statement regarding whether I go to Zurich or not.

KING: OK.

PUTIN I think it would be better for me not to be there prior to these elections -- [...]

KING: I've got –

PUTIN -- so that it would not appear as an element of pressurizing their decision on my part.

KING: I gathered that.

PUTIN Now, as regards to the attitude toward gays and lesbians, [...]

In this case, however, the follow-up is not initiated by King as in extract (5a) and the topic had not been introduced in the turn before the commercial break. In fact, King immediately introduces a totally different topic after the break. Putin, however, returns to the prior topic, using a metacommunicative comment ('I'd like to finalize my statement ...') to signal explicitly both the thematic coherence and his speaking right. We can thus speak of a follow-up which is both content-based and force-based. Putin felt he had been denied his interactional role as an interviewee by being cut short, and indeed, interrupting a politician in the middle of his answer can be seen as face threatening. In terms of the social role, we can say that by reclaiming his right to speak, Putin asserted his superior position, which was accepted by King ('OK'). However, both speakers' power is subordinate to the power of the media institution. Ensuring the commercial break is shown as previously agreed is more important than finishing a topic. Participant positioning is thus also largely determined by wider institutional practices and values. On Putin's official website, extract (5b) is presented as follows in the English version (the Russian one is identical in structure and content):

(6) **Larry King:** Will you go to Zurich to make a personal appeal?

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, that's something I thought about, of course. But I think that now, when FIFA members are coming under such pointed attacks and attempts to disgrace them, they need the space to make an objective decision without any external pressure.

As you know, I've been keen on sport all my life, and I love football but I don't think I should appear there before the vote lest my presence be regarded as an attempt to exert some kind of pressure on the decision-making process.

**Larry King:** Something, Mr Prime Minister, I don't think you've ever been asked. [...] What is the Russian policy towards gays and lesbians in your military?

**Vladimir Putin:** I've tried to answer similar questions before. [...]

As we can see, Putin's answer is presented as one long and coherent one, there is no reference to commercial breaks. In short: the follow-up has been deleted. The same editing processes were made to the video recording, which is one long smooth question-answer interaction. These editing processes too reflect the power of the institution, but in contrast to the economic and commercial values which are relevant to the media institution CNN, the values for the political institution of the Russian government are of an ideological nature.

## 5 Conclusion

Political arguments cross linguistic, cultural, socio-political, and ideological boundaries as a result of translation and/or interpreting. In interpreter-mediated interaction, responses to

questions are strictly speaking responses to the question as rendered by the interpreter, and in the same way, the response too is transmitted back by the interpreter. The interaction at an interpreter-mediated discursive event such as a political interview or a press conference is thus much more complex than at a similar monolingual event where we have a direct exchange between politician(s) and journalist(s).

Interpreters (and by extension translators) are active agents who play a significant role in shaping the interaction. They are legitimate participants in the discursive event, and their performance and the output of their performance cannot be ignored or underestimated. As I have tried to illustrate, using a variety of sources (such as transcripts in various languages, video recordings) can enrich the analysis and (may) lead to different interpretations.

Follow-ups at press conferences can occur at later stages in the question-answer session and can also be follow-ups to prior questions. This is due to the nature of international press conferences where the number of questions which can be asked is limited and where journalists are normally only granted speaking rights once. Recontextualisation processes in the mass media can also be described as follow-ups in a macro-perspective. Here too, information gets selected and undergoes further transformations.

In sum: Follow-ups are more complex in interpreter/translator-mediated discourse and it may well be that a follow-up in a narrower sense (i.e. as the third part in a sequence initiation – response – follow-up) is motivated by the interpreter's rendition. Such a case has not yet been encountered, and a more systematic analysis would need to be conducted before any conclusive statement can be made.

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