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# Working at cross-purposes in interpreting through doublespeak

**Théophile Munyangoyo**

## **Abstract**

The concept of fidelity has been at the forefront of the conduit model narratives in interpreting. However, since interpreting operates in various modes, modalities and settings, seeking neutrality as the interpreter's performance indicator seems unrealistic. Interpreting as a multimodal activity and process highlights the meaningfulness of the concept of appropriateness in communication models. From the relevance of semantic components of linguistic utterances to the importance of pragmatic mediation in interpreting, the interpreter's multidimensional approach can lead to working at cross-purposes while managing sensitivity. Using secondary research and primary research data obtained through self-reported experiences, this article explores and reflects on when, how and why doublespeak works in cross-purposes interpreting. It concludes that in the context of interpreter-mediated encounters where the interpreter is an involved participant or is expected to play an active role in seeking and fostering communicative appropriateness, using and interpreting doublespeak requires putting linguistic dimensions and the interpreter's mediation role on an equal footing.

**Key-words:** applied linguistics, communication model, cross-purposes, doublespeak, interpretation, interpreting, translation.

## **1 Introduction**

In a professional context, one of the key principles that inform competence and effectiveness in interpreting has always been fidelity. In seeking unbiased practice and rendering the message faithfully, interpreters consciously adhere to the principle of conveying the content of the speaker's message to the best of their ability. They strive to facilitate truthfully and accurately communication.

Effective interpreting activity and process are expected to foster conciseness and clarity of the message, which is conveyed without addition, omission, or distortion of meaning. In relation to the traditional expectations of the interpreter's role, some theorists such as Gentile (1991) argue that "the role of the interpreter can be summarised as one where he/she is required to conduct himself or herself in a manner which makes the situation with an interpreter, as far as possible, similar to a situation without an interpreter" (p.30).

However, the interpretation does not aim to convey semantic components only. It also seeks to unveil and reflect every intention and feelings of the speaker. To that end, the linguistic, cultural and contextual mediation, which is one of the core elements of interpretation, serves as the interlocutors' relationship management tool.

Indeed any act of communication encompasses the linguistic and extra-linguistic domains. When communication involves two languages, then the interpretation becomes a complex operation, because each language is a system and thus no two languages are similar. As said Culler (1976), "if language were simply a nomenclature for a set of universal concepts, it would be easy to translate from one language to another. One would simply replace the French name for a concept with the English name [...]. Each language articulates or organizes

the world differently. Languages do not simply name existing categories, they articulate their own” (pp.21-22).

In this regard, when in interpreter-mediated encounters the interpreter becomes an involved active contributor to the act of communication, he can work at cross-purposes, attempting to mediate between being a conduit tool and a communication facilitator. But since interpreting is not expected to be part of the transmission process but instead to adhere to principles of communication systems, the neutral role of the interpreter often looks chimerical. In this context, interpreting is viewed “as a *practice profession* [...] where careful consideration and judgement regarding situation and human interaction factors are central to doing effective work” (Dean & Pollard, 2005, p.259). After all, what would be the intrinsic meaning of ‘interpreting’ if the activity was informed by the transmission model, which is completely free from any form of linguistic and contextual interpretative interference? Nevertheless, when that form of interference is informed by the interpreter’s purposeful desire to manipulate some communicative features, it triggers the process of working at cross-purposes, either through doublespeak or purposeful deletion. It is legitimate to explore when and why the interpretation requires the interpreter to work at cross-purposes and how the rationale behind it generates a multifaceted approach.

## **2 Understanding doublespeak and the discourse of deletion in communication encounters**

Using doublespeak consists of deleting, muting or replacing a plain expression that might be considered offending and unpleasant to the audience by another, which is relatively mild, inoffensive, believed to be uncontroversial concept or phrase. Doublespeak, in this respect, often refers to the use of euphemism as a language that is deliberately constructed to disguise its explicit meaning by displaying interpretative connotations for the concepts. Generally speaking, this is what can be referred to as doublespeak. In this study, or let us call it reflection, this concept is not used in a sense of evasive, ambiguous or distorting language with the intention to deceive or confuse. It is rather referred to as a communication tool that some interpreters use with the aim to deliberately disguise or reverse the unpleasant meaning of words; making the truth less controversial without denying its nature.

In his extensive study on the multiple forms and usages of doublespeak, Lutz (1989, 1990, 1996, 1997, 1999), has thoroughly conducted an enriching research on different ways in which this way of expression has conquered the rhetoric of modern discourses which are mainly driven by the concepts of appropriateness and correctness. In *The New Doublespeak: No One Knows What Anyone's Saying Anymore*, Lutz (1997) describes the doublespeak as euphemism, jargon, gobbledygook, and inflated language. He centres his study in different areas of the society, including politics, military and corporations where doublespeak seems to abound. His argument is that the doublespeak practice uses a language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. He demonstrates how politicians strategically use doublespeak through a rhetoric that can be open to multi-interpretations to cover up what might be called lies or deceptions. It is in this regard that “reform” has become a buzzword. Any purposeful changes that serve politics are said to be in line with the reform, including healthcare service reform when it comes to cutting spending in access to healthcare provision. Welfare reform can be used as a means of avoiding any explicit mention of slashing state benefits. The real meaning of military service reform could often be demobilising military service personnel. Using the overseas development aid reform in a speech could provide the obfuscation of actions deemed unethical when attempting to dry out any financial support to third world countries. Border control reform could be the softest way of putting in place draconian measures that

unequivocally stage waves of massive expulsion of immigrants that could otherwise be seen as a breach of human rights, and the list can go on. 'Reform' may be a simple and plain word in this respect but its meanings may have rich and deep connotative interpretations. Doublespeak can therefore placate listeners to avoid any spontaneous negative reaction to announcements or statements.

Doublespeak ranges from those multi-semantic words, which are used most of the time, such as free market, synergy, competitive dynamics, empowerment, adjustment, restructure, etc. It can refer to circumlocutory speech that uses euphemistic rhetoric to neutralise objectionable expressions, which otherwise can be harmful to others' emotions and feelings. In banking industry, banks don't have 'bad loans' or 'bad debts', they have 'non-performing assets' or 'non-performing credits', multinationals never lose money; they just experience 'negative cash flow,' 'net profit revenue deficiencies', no one gets fired anymore but companies make 'workforce adjustments' instead (Wasserman and Hausrath, 2005).

It is in this way that military jargon has become a socially acceptable expression. Okrent (2005) argues that in military context, soldiers have also used doublespeak to soften the horror of the war and turn carnage into understandable actions. 'Friendly fire' is commonly used to describe incidents of accidentally killing troops from the allied forces; precise bombing is 'surgical strike'; civilian deaths during bombing raids are described as 'collateral damages'; to kill or to incapacitate the enemy on the frontline is 'to neutralise', while the destruction of the enemy's fire power is known as 'assertive disarmament', (Okrent, 2005), etc.

In politics, double speech is often used to alleviate the discomfort of a waffling speaker or to avoid or shift strategically responsibility. 'Playing the blame game' is used to dismiss calls for accountability; 'playing party politics' is referred to in attempt to silence a political opponent by minimising the relevance of some key points in a debate; 'playing the race card' (Aunk,2002) can be used to dismiss any argument deemed to use manipulative strategies in race relations to serve own agenda.

Doublespeak is increasingly becoming an accepted and established practice in modern societies. It is deliberately constructed for and driven by communicative encounters for specific purposes, aiming to surface a desirable outcome. If 'tax increase' becomes 'revenue enhancement' (Lutz, 1989), the meaning deconstruction/reconstruction dichotomy plays with the psychological behaviour of the audience to make them accept policies by focussing on the effect and not the cause. 'Revenue enhancement' would be considered a fanciful outcome. The decision of increasing tax becomes reasonable and noble because 'revenue enhancement' as the end of the process makes it more acceptable.

In communication encounters, doublespeak is increasingly becoming the norm as an operational tool that helps in managing sensitivity to determine the nature and scope of the act of communication. In some cases, when interlocutors work at legitimate cross-purposes due to their different views and opinions on sensitive issues, the dynamics of their communicative relationship can be driven by implicit or explicit friction.

Faced with the communication climate of filtering, the interpreter can never ignore the issues of appropriateness and correctness. One would wonder how the interpreter's role of neutral player within the interpretation process could not be compromised when it comes to safeguarding communicative modalities of communication models. By opposing collusion and consciousness, it is pertinent to examine how the uses of doublespeak can serve the purpose of attempting to delete or soften sensitive or offensive reality without damaging standards of the fidelity principle, the interpreter's integrity and performance.

In fact, it is worth reminding that when people attempt to communicate, what is really in their mind collides with the desire to foster the principles of appropriateness and correctness. In all communication encounters, the choice of utterances is determined by their semantic relevance, as well as their pragmatic appropriateness. Given the fact that contexts dictate the types of utterances, the concept of appropriateness can and has to be referred to in the choice of utterances so that communication can fulfil its aims and objectives. "In an interpreter-mediated conversation, the progression and substance of talk, the distribution of responsibility for this among co-interlocutors, and what, as a result of interaction, becomes mutual and shared understanding - all will to some extent depend on the interpreter's words and deeds" (Wadensjö, 1998, p.195).

Using doublespeak and discourse of deletion as mediating tools in interpreting is recognised as part of common practice. After all, Shackman (1984) rightly defines the interpreter as someone who "is responsible for enabling professional and client, with very different backgrounds and perceptions and in an unequal relationship of power and knowledge, to communicate to their mutual satisfaction" (p.18). This mutual satisfaction can often require multidimensional interventions by the interpreter in seeking and fostering the appropriateness, depending on the communication aims. Roderick Jones (quoted by Cameron, 2004), EU conference interpreter, was actually asked how he would play the interpreting mediation role when someone suddenly lost his temper and started using rude phrases about somebody. Jones recognised that he would use the most colourful language to tone it down: "I would tend to tone it down. That kind of thing has happened to me. [...] I can remember that one French speaker was extremely crude about the behaviour and the attitudes of other delegations, and I think if one had translated it honestly into English, one would have been using four-letter words, very strong language. Quite simply, in order to avoid upsetting people and unnecessarily adding to the tension in the room I think the interpreter is entitled just to tone it down a little bit."

Jones' revelations highlight how complex the interpreter's role is. They unveil the true face of the world where political, diplomatic and public relations discourse is driven by the group dynamics of sensitiveness. This is where the appropriateness of utterances is shaped by the impact that the message could have on the audience and different behaviours it could trigger. In this context, the interpreter becomes an involved party in the communication enterprise when his/her analytical skills are called upon for relationship management. This mediation engagement becomes a cross-boundary role with which the interpreter works at cross-purposes. Due to playing a tactful diplomacy, rendering the message faithfully becomes open to interpretations and the scope of interpreting practice makes doublespeak a powerful tool in managing sensitivity.

It is quite understandable to imagine that the readers' first reaction to Jones' decision could be the disbelief. People may even describe his action as unethical in deontological terms. This is because for a long time it has been commonly recognised that the primordial role of interpreter is transmitting the message without summarising, changing register, adding, omitting, editorialising or toning it down. Accuracy, conciseness and completeness have often been perceived as the major warrants of the effectiveness of the conveyance of the meaning within the spirit and in light of the source. But because interpreting communication could not be essentially seen as the movement of information transmission from one party to another, critics have started to highlight and "recognize the complexity in the work interpreters do" (Clifford, 2004, p.114). They pinpoint the interdependent features that the role of interpreter entails. "Interpreting is more than transposing one language to another... it is throwing a semantic bridge between two people from different cultures and thought worlds" (Namy, 1977, p.25).

The question of toning down the message by using colourful language should not be seen as new to interpreting practice. Understanding, using and managing taboo words in teaching, translation and interpreting (Grosser & Anthony, 1966; Wells 1989; Allan, 1990; Jay, 2009; Linfoot-ham, 2005) are among the most eloquent examples to underline the existence of such communication features. The genuine question is to understand the extent to which Roderick Jones' active involvement in the act of communication hindered 'accuracy' and 'completeness'. But if toning the message down was about using doublespeak, his action could then be within the remit of the interpreter's mediation role.

As some critics argue, "interpreters base translations on their best judgement of what consumers mean, simultaneously taking into consideration evidence from consumers' language utterances, what they see taking place in environment" (Dean & Pollard, 2005, p.267). Doublespeak can therefore be used as euphemism in attempt to tactfully express statements related to sensitive matters that one could describe as expressing taboos.

In the expression of sympathy or breaking bad news, such as "I am sorry your mother 'has passed away'", the doublespeak as a euphemism subtly conveys the message of empathy, respect and compassion more than plainly and explicitly saying, "I am sorry your mother has 'died'". In this respect, it is clear that doublespeak can be referred to for taboo deformation in communication. In religion, for instance, doublespeak can be used in handling profanity with sensitivity to avoid clashes, as violating taboo through explicit or inappropriate language would be considered disrespectful, or a desecration or debasement of someone or something venerated in specific cultures and societies.

From this point, it is clear that doublespeak is not created for the sole purpose of catering for own interests. It can help in managing intercultural and political correctness within modern interdependent world, which is driven by sensitiveness in communicative approaches. This raises the issue of appropriateness in communication, which is not new in any act of communication.

In fact, since 'avortement' as the french word for abortion in english is deemed to be causing emotional harm, doublespeak has created in the french context 'interruption volontaire de grossesse', which is known under the acronym of IVG and could be literally translated as 'voluntary interruption of pregnancy'. If 'interruption' of pregnancy is softer in tone than 'termination' of pregnancy, the end result in terms of interpretation of the message seems the same. If 'brainstorming' has been perceived to be offensive to epileptics and has been banned in favour of 'thought showers', then interpreters find here a window of opportunity to conquer the ownership of doublespeak so that they can be able to tone down the intensity of messages to manage sensitivity.

In the opposite case, some interpreters who are working at cross-purposes contribute to the enrichment of communicative encounters. This means that beyond what has been said, interpreters often add some communication features to the original message. Data from self-reported experiences that were collected among interpreters who participated in the study to explore cases of using doublespeak and ethical dilemmas related to dealing with difficult situations in interpreting, participant K said; "In the end, he was convicted and the Judge read out the time that he was going to serve in prison. I felt my heart being filled up with a great relief. I felt full of energy to talk. I loudly and emphatically conveyed the message regarding the sentence, making sure that no nuance was missed. I forgot that I was standing next to him. When he was ordered to go downstairs, back to his cell, I happily watched him leaving the courtroom. Leaving my side seemed to me leaving my life. I believed in his guilt and was convinced that he was going to pay for his evil actions". While interpreting for a client who was in a courtroom for child abuse, the involved interpreter marked his utterances by empathically conveying the message. While this case can reveal ethical dilemmas that arise in

similar situations, but it can equally show how complex interpreting and the interpreter's behaviour can be in some settings.

It is clear that effective interpreting seeks to cater for “interpersonal demands [which] are demands that arise from interaction between individuals present in the situation” (Dean & Pollard 2011, p.169). This is where doublespeak comes in to facilitate communication, whose aim is shared among all parties in this act of interpreter-mediated encounters. Knowing how to manipulate the euphemistic nuances by using colourful language in the spirit of doublespeak has always allowed interpreters to embed some key features of their complex role into the communication model. There is a clear need to revisit ethical dilemmas in interpreting and match them with expectations of the interpreting services and the reality of the practice.

### 3 Conclusion

To some extent and for some reasons, communication strategies are increasingly shaped by the culture of correctness, appropriateness and progressiveness of utterances. The act of communication is more and more subjected to words twisting, which is resorting to turning some concepts and phrases into euphemistic nuances to make the meaning more acceptable.

While linguistic and cultural competences have always been at the forefront of core elements that foster effectiveness in interpreting, it is clear that the high level of oral fluency, lexicon, idioms, register and cross-cultural capabilities may need to be supplemented with analytical skills.

In many communication activities, such as interpreting, decision making to determine the appropriateness of words and utterances is a core element in seeking a better understanding between the two parties. In this communication activity and process, doublespeak could play a pivotal role in managing sensitivity. Although the main interpreter's mission is to convey semantic elements, it is fair and necessary to say that since the mediation task aims to convey the message expressed through intentions and feelings of the source-language speaker into the receptor's language, mediation strategies can require interpreters to work at cross-purposes. To this end, doublespeak often becomes a mediating tool.

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