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Conference interpreting at press conferences

Annalisa Sandrelli

Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, the advent of the Internet and of satellite and digital terrestrial TV channels has produced an exponential growth of news reporting across the globe and a soaring number of press conferences, press statements and interviews, with some of them becoming newsworthy events in themselves (Clayman & Heritage 2002a). As media encounters are often bilingual or even multilingual, demand for interpreting has increased in parallel (Castillo 2015). However, despite the growing importance of this market niche, it has begun to attract the interest of interpreting studies scholars only recently, which explains the relative dearth of research data.

This chapter focuses on interpreting in press conferences as communicative situations with specific dynamics with which interpreters need to be familiar, in order to perform satisfactorily. In interpreting terms, a crucial distinction needs to be drawn between situations in which interpreters provide a service to the primary participants (i.e. they carry out an ‘instrumental function’) and those in which they interpret for the benefit of an audience who is not directly involved in the press conference (‘documentary function’) (Viezzi 2013). Straniero Sergio (2007) talks about interpreting in ‘shared’ and ‘displaced’ situationality settings, while Falbo (2012) suggests using the labels in praesentia and in absentia (in relation to simultaneous interpreting, but equally applicable to other modes). The distinction is significant because when interpreters interact with the primary participants, they can be considered present (whether they share the same physical space or not, as is illustrated below) and they are instrumental to communication. By contrast, when interpreters perform a documentary function, the primary participants may not even realise that they are being interpreted into another language; this is often the case with monolingual press conferences broadcast by a TV channel or on the Web and translated for the benefit of a target language audience. Of course, in some cases the same interpreters may perform both an instrumental and a documentary function at the same time, such as when the press conference in which they are working is broadcast on television for the benefit of the viewers at home; there are also cases in which the same press conference is interpreted twice, by the on-site interpreters for the primary participants (in praesentia) and by a different team of TV interpreters for the target language audience (in absentia).
The primary focus of this chapter is those press conferences in which interpreters make communication between the primary participants possible (i.e. when they perform an instrumental function), whether the event is broadcast or not. It does not dwell upon broadcast press conferences specifically, since they are discussed in greater detail by Falbo (Chapter 7, in this volume); however, reference to such settings and practices is made wherever it is relevant. The chapter begins by presenting the variables that can be used to describe press conferences; then, it outlines the challenges of interpreting in such communicative situations; and, finally, some conclusions are presented.

Press conferences as an example of institutional interaction

Press conferences belong to the broad category of media encounters, which enable the press to gain access to public figures and collect information and ‘quotable’ answers for newspaper articles or TV/radio pieces:

[N]ewspapers and television news stories regularly contain verbatim or paraphrased statements from a variety of sources. While some of these are derived from written texts, many are culled from interactional situations, with interviews, press conferences, public speeches, and congressional hearings being prominent examples.  

(Clayman 1990: 81)

All media encounters are examples of institutional interaction, i.e. they are communicative situations with an external goal which pre-determines a specific organisation of space, participants’ roles and power relations, acceptable topics and textual genres, duration, procedures, turn-taking norms, and so on (Drew & Heritage 1992; Orletti 2000). Different types of media activities are characterised by specific interactional dynamics: press statements are monologues in which a public figure delivers a prepared or (semi-)impromptu declaration without engaging in interaction with the assembled media; interviews are dialogues in one-to-one or one-to-many situations (depending on the number of interviewers and interviewees), in which both questions and answers are prepared or semi-prepared (unlike in spontaneous conversation); finally, press conferences enable dialogic interaction between one (or several) public figure(s) and press representatives.

Generally speaking, in all press conferences the institutional duty of the press is to ask questions, while that of the public figures involved is to answer them. Against this common background, there are several variables which differentiate one press conference from another: goal, setting, participants, topics, structure, format, duration and tone, to name just the most important ones.

The first and most obvious parameter is the institutional goal and related setting, which determine all the other variables. For example, political press conferences may be regular occurrences called by the public figures themselves (such as the White House press briefings) or may be held at the end of a meeting to “bring together two political leaders in a ritualized communicative event, with the objective of projecting a united front on crucial global political issues” (Bhatia 2006: 176). The space where press conferences take place and participants’ positioning in it have symbolic significance, with the public figures usually standing or sitting where everyone can see them (often on a stage or a raised platform), while journalists sit or stand in a lower position.1 This symbolic use of space reflects the public figures’ conversational dominance. The spatial dimension of the setting can also vary along the physical-virtual continuum, i.e. from face-to-face encounters to virtual events in which interaction takes place via videoconferencing technology.
The constellation of interactants can be varied: the primary participants always include the newsworthy figure(s) and the press; in addition, there is often a moderator who acts as a gatekeeper, ensures compliance with norms and sometimes acts as a discussant. Moreover, press conferences can be placed along the private-public continuum, ranging from press-only events to events that are open to the public, who are sometimes allowed to ask questions (for example, in a debate after a film screening). When press conferences are broadcast on TV or on the Web, there is also a secondary audience at home, who nowadays may be able to interact with the primary participants via social media in real time.

A third parameter is the format and (macro- and micro-) structure of each press conference. Unlike spontaneous dialogue, press conferences have a macro-structure that includes a number of ratified speech events (Bendazzoli 2012). For example, in diplomatic press conferences, there is usually an opening sequence (an introduction and a welcome), followed by the political leaders’ individual statements, an interactional sequence in which they take questions from the press, and finally a closing sequence (Bhatia 2006). In football press conferences held during international tournaments, there is an opening sequence (welcome, procedural and housekeeping announcements), followed by the question and answer (Q&A) session, and sometimes a closing statement (Sandrelli 2012b); by contrast, in press conferences organised to present a new player, there is an introduction by a club executive, a statement by the new player and the Q&A session (Sandrelli 2015). In terms of micro-structure, while opening and closing sequences are monological, the main interactional format of press conferences is dialogical, i.e. communication is managed in a series of one-to-one interactions between the public figure(s) and one journalist at a time, with the other journalists waiting for their turn. Press conferences normally have a set duration, which means that there is competition for speaking turns and some journalists may not get a chance to ask questions.

Questions and answers are the typical adjacency pairs in press conferences: each exchange is made up of a question in the initiating turn and an answer in the responding turn; journalists may be allowed to pursue the same line of questioning in the third turn with a follow-up question at the public figure’s sole discretion (unlike what happens in interviews). This turn-taking mechanism has several significant consequences. Firstly, press conferences tend to be characterised by high turn-taking speed and fairly short turn duration. Secondly, as each journalist usually introduces a new topic, there is local coherence and cohesion within each Q&A adjacency pair, but not necessarily in the overall macro-structure of the press conference. Thirdly, as journalists try to cram as much material as possible into their speaking turn, question structure tends to be relatively complex; some questions may begin with a long prefatory statement, others are made up of several questions one after the other, and in some cases a question is followed by one or several reformulations (‘multi-part questions’ and ‘question cascade’, respectively; Clayman & Heritage 2002a, 2002b).

Although the tone of press conferences may vary along the collaborative-conflictual continuum, even in the most relaxed encounters there is always an underlying tension between the opposing agendas of primary participants. Journalists are expected to be impartial but probing at the same time, as they are there to collect information which the public figure may not necessarily be willing to disclose. Clearly, it is very difficult for journalists to be neutral and adversarial at the same time (Clayman & Heritage 2002a); in addition, modern journalism tends to be less deferential and more direct than in the past, sometimes to the point of aggressiveness (Clayman & Heritage 2002b). For their part, the public figures may wish to resist answering certain questions but without seeming too evasive, to protect their public faces; they may address only one part of the question, add a digression, shift the focus of a question, reformulate it or challenge it (Clayman 1993, 2001; Clayman & Heritage 2002a; Partington 2001). For example,
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at the end of a tense diplomatic meeting both leaders will be keen to present it as a success and will resist any questions challenging this view; indeed, “[i]t is rare that … the politicians will directly acknowledge a disagreement, or an antagonistic relationship” (Bhatia 2006: 181).

Interpreter-mediated press conferences

Press conferences can be very challenging for interpreters. What follows is a description of the most relevant parameters in press conference interpreting, based on Angelelli’s application of Hymes’ SPEAKING model to conference and dialogue interpreting (2000), Alexieva’s typology of interpreter-mediated events (1997) and Bendazzoli’s classification of speech events in conferences (2012). Reference to existing research is made wherever possible; however, more empirical data are needed in this area of interpreting studies to account for the great variability of press conferences and to cover more language combinations, interpreting modes and settings.

Institutional goal and setting

Firstly, let us examine the relevance of the institutional goal of the press conference to interpreting. Familiarity with the setting and related rituals is essential to understand frame and structure and to anticipate topics; it can be of great help in preparation for any assignment, whether in praesentia or in absentia. An example of the former is the small corpus of football press conferences described in Sandrelli (2015), in which club officials present new players to the press. To prepare for such assignments, interpreters must keep up with football-related news in all of their working languages, to find out how the player’s transfer came about, as recurring topics include his motivations in joining the club, his technical and tactical characteristics, and how he is going to fit in the new team. Another example of the importance of prior preparation is the press conferences in the multilingual FOOTIE (Football in Europe) corpus, involving the head coaches of several national football teams during the 2008 European Championships. During the tournament, the interpreters were granted access to the Media Information System, an online server with recordings of all the press conferences, information about the teams’ media activities and, most importantly, full press kits:

Since the journalists themselves often browsed the press kit before the beginning of each conference, they tended to quote some of the facts and figures in their questions and comments. Without prior preparation, it would have been extremely difficult for the interpreters to catch game statistics, names of past players, and so on.

(Sandrelli 2012a: 128)

Familiarity with goal and setting is even more important in displaced situationality settings, such as broadcast press conferences translated for the target language audience by an interpreter working in a TV studio. Straniero Sergio (2003) and Pignataro (2011) highlight the main challenges of interpreting the Formula One press conferences held at the end of Grand Prix races: the fact that their pace is completely independent of the translation (as the drivers are not even aware that what they say is being interpreted), the technical nature of the topics, the constant change in speakers and accents, the need to keep a short time lag (between the original sound and the interpreted version), and so on. Familiarity with the setting and the relative predictability of press conferences are the key elements which make it possible for interpreters to cope with such assignments. Straniero Sergio (2003) describes the rituality of these press conferences, in
which the winning driver is invariably congratulated on his victory and asked about the most noteworthy aspects of the race, about his competitors, car testing and expectations of the next race. Therefore, “[k]nowing exactly what happened during the race or during previous races provides a sort of ‘safety net’ for the interpreter” (Pignataro 2011: 85), who is able to say something contextually plausible even when source message comprehension is not perfect.

**Interpreting set-ups and modes**

Another important aspect of the setting is where the press conference can be placed along the embodied-disembodied continuum, i.e. how the interpreter’s participation is affected by spatial arrangements, by the availability (or otherwise) of equipment (interpreting console, screens, microphones, videoconferencing technology, etc.) and by the way in which talk-in-interaction is multimodally organised. In shared situationality settings, the interpreter may be in the same meeting room as the participants (on-site interpreting), in an adjacent room connected via a direct cable (proximal interpreting), or working remotely from a different location via videoconference technology (remote interpreting). By contrast, in displaced situationality settings, the mode is always remote interpreting (see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume). On onsite assignments, the simultaneous or consecutive mode may be used (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume). If only two languages are involved (bilingual press conferences), consecutive interpreting is the most frequent choice, because it does not require any specialised equipment and it can be used in combination with whispered interpreting, provided the seating arrangement allows it. For example, in the above-mentioned player presentations to the press (Sandrelli 2015), consecutive interpreting was used in both language directions when the interpreter and player were sitting far apart, while whispered interpreting was used to translate the questions into the player’s native language when the interpreter was sitting next to him.

If the interpreter is working in the proximal condition (i.e. in a room adjacent to the meeting room), the mode is simultaneous (Alexieva 1997), and it is useful to have a monitor in each booth and a camera operator in the meeting room. An example of this condition can be found in the FOOTIE press conferences, which were trilingual (the languages of the two teams and English), with two booths and one interpreter in each, working in both language directions (from A to B and B to A); because each football stadium had different space constraints, in half of the cases the booths were placed in the meeting room, while in the remaining cases the interpreters worked from an adjacent room (Sandrelli 2017).

In remote interpreting, the interpreter is in a different location and is connected to the primary participants via technology. Castillo (2015) describes a number of interpreting set-ups for TV and radio interviews, and many of his considerations also apply to press conferences. He describes different situations in which the interpreter enables communication between primary participants: “the interpreter may be with the interviewee in a remote location, or with the host in the studio communicating remotely with the guest” (Castillo 2015: 290). In relation to interpreting modes, he points out that preference is given to simultaneous interpreting on TV because on-air time is so precious, while in radio programmes consecutive interpreting is preferred, to avoid overlapping voices. In displaced situationality settings (such as press conferences or multi-party debates translated for target language TV viewers), the interpreters work from the TV studios and the channel may broadcast the entire event live or edit the recording and use only some clips (Castillo 2015; Straniero Sergio 2007, 2011). In such situations, the interpreters are subject to two additional sources of stress, which are typical of all TV interpreting assignments. Firstly, they interpret an event which they cannot influence in any way; secondly, their work is subject to scrutiny by millions of viewers and the TV setting.
carries with it certain expectations in relation to voice control, prosody, pauses, and so on (Castillo 2015; Pignataro 2011; Straniero Sergio 2007). 4

**Dialogical interaction**

Regardless of the differences in interpreting set-ups and modes, the key challenge of press conference interpreting is always the need to reflect the dialogical nature of interaction in the target language version. In consecutive interpreting, the easiest way to reflect the turn-taking mechanism is to allow the interpreter to translate after each speaking turn; this is not always as straightforward as it may seem, as the participants’ knowledge of the working languages may affect interactional dynamics. Sandrelli (2015) found several examples of hesitations and overlapping between interpreter and football player when the latter had some knowledge of the language used by journalists and tried to answer without waiting for the translation. Overlaps and interruptions are also very common in talk shows and interviews (Straniero Sergio 2007) and televised debates (Dal Fovo 2012, 2018), in which representing the original interactivity (and sometimes verbal conflict) in the target language version is part of the ethics of entertainment. Indeed, in TV interpreting, it is customary to assign specific speakers to each interpreter, so as to make it easier for the audience to understand transitions thanks to the changing voices (clearly, this requires very good teamwork; Straniero Sergio 2007). When there are fewer interpreters than speakers or an individual interpreter is working on his/her own, prosody and pauses can be used to convey who is saying what (Castillo 2015; Dal Fovo 2018). For example, in the FOOTIE corpus, three different strategies were identified to signal turn-taking: the use of intonation and pauses, sometimes accompanied by the addition of discourse markers such as ‘well’ or ‘yes’ at the beginning of answers; the use of ‘question’ and ‘reply’ tags at the beginning of the turn; and the use of footing shifts from the first person to the third (Sandrelli 2017). Nevertheless, a ‘monologisation effect’ (Straniero Sergio 2007), with turn omissions (reduction in overlaps and interruptions) and simplification of complex turns (multiple questions and question cascades) is almost inevitable when interpreting press conferences, owing to the speed and the constant switch in speakers (and languages, in multilingual events) and depending on the set-up and available equipment (i.e. whether the interpreters are together in the same booth, each with his/her own console or not, and so on) (Dal Fovo 2018; Falbo 2012; Sandrelli 2012b). By way of example, the average speed in the FOOTIE press conferences ranged between a minimum of 135 words per minute (wpm) to a maximum of 185 wpm (Sandrelli 2012a, 2012b); moreover, “the interpreters had to translate very short bursts of speech and, therefore, had virtually no time to get used to speakers’ voices and ways of speaking …” (Sandrelli 2012b: 89). As a consequence, press conference interpreters must keep their décalage to a minimum and try to conclude their translation almost at the same time as the original speakers, especially when working as a team (alternating voices) or when using relay interpreting (see Graves, Pascual Olaguibel & Pearson, Chapter 8, in this volume). This constraint becomes imperative when the interpreter is translating for television (Pignataro 2011; Straniero Sergio 2003).

The constantly changing topics in press conferences tend to result in a lack of overall textual coherence, replaced by topical sequentiality in the Q&A adjacency pair (Dal Fovo 2012). Sandrelli (2018) analysed questioning and answering strategies in football press conferences and found that, overall, the interpreters managed to reproduce the predominantly adversarial style of questioning and the resisting strategies employed by coaches (such as indirect answers and question challenges). Similarly, Dal Fovo (2018) compared the strategies used by different teams of interpreters translating the same EU electoral debates, namely,
European Commission interpreters and interpreters working for Rainews24, the Italian public all-news channel. She found that the TV interpreters were more successful at representing the confrontational dynamics of political debates than the institutional interpreters, probably on account of their familiarity with the dynamics of televised debates. Similarly, Pignataro (2011) identified the strategies used by TV interpreters to restore coherence and cohesion when interpreting Formula One press conferences. Discourse markers were used to manage speech flow and make comprehension easier for the audience. Moreover, despite the time pressures, the interpreters frequently provided additional explanations (“contextualization cues”) to make up for the audience’s assumed lack of knowledge.

**Interpreting norms**

Further challenges shared with other interpreting settings must be added to the equation, such as the power relations between participants (along the symmetry-asymmetry continuum), participants’ language competence and accent (along the native-non-native scale), the sensitive nature of some press conferences, and so on.

One of the settings in which all of the above play a key role is diplomatic interpreting (see Slaughter Olsen, Liu & Viaggio, Chapter 5, in this volume). There is a growing body of research coming from China (see Dawrant, Wang & Jiang, Chapter 15, in this volume), where government press conference interpreting (i.e. interpreting during the annual “Two Sessions” of the National People’s Congress) is emerging as an interpreting genre in its own right: a very comprehensive overview can be found in Wang and Tang (2020). Given the sensitive nature of diplomacy and the general challenges of press conference interpreting, it is hardly surprising that several studies have focused on the norms at work in such settings. Li (2018: 4) points out that the interpreters who work in these press conferences are Ministry of Foreign Affairs civil servants and that “[t]his distinctive Chinese context with its sociocultural and ideological implications needs to be explored for the world to understand the reality of interpreting in China”. Li studied the influence of the sociocultural context on the interpreters’ translation choices in the CECIC corpus (Chinese-English Conference Interpreting Corpus); more specifically, different types of modality shifts were identified in the interpreters’ renditions depending on the identity of the speaker (whether a Chinese government official or a journalist). Pan and Zheng (2017) and Pan (2020) focused on hedges in CEPCPCI corpus (Chinese–English Parallel Corpus of Press Conference Interpreting). They found that hedges are a prominent feature in government press conference interpreting and discovered that the hedges added by male interpreters were primarily content-motivated (aimed at achieving more accuracy), while those used by female interpreters were audience-motivated (aimed at facilitating target text comprehension) (see also Defrancq, Collard, Magnifico & Iglesias Fernández, Chapter 30, in this volume). Wang (2012) explored three types of shifts in the CEIPPC corpus (Chinese-English Interpreting for Premier Press Conferences Corpus), namely, additions, reductions and corrections, and tried to identify the norms underlying such shifts. The study found a relatively high frequency of additions aimed at improving cohesion and explaining logical links, while in this setting “interpreters tend to be very cautious in adding new information, reducing the speaker’s words or correcting the speaker’s mistakes” (Wang 2012: 211). Similarly, Matsushita (2016) focused on risk management strategies in a corpus of interpreter-mediated press conferences held at the Japan National Press Club (English–Japanese). In contrast to established consecutive interpreting practice, where there is a tendency to summarise, she found evidence of frequent lexical reformulation aimed at ensuring maximum accuracy. Thus, in political settings, where every nuance counts, the interpreters had a tendency to lengthen the target
language text to make it more explicit. Interestingly, the available research seems to indicate that specific norms are at work in specific settings (see also Pradas Macías & Zwischenberger, Chapter 19, in this volume). In the case of broadcast press conferences, for example, Straniero-Sergio (2003) found empirical evidence of the interpreters’ “emergency strategies, i.e. strategies which usually are considered ‘last resort’ but in this type of SI they become the norm” (Straniero-Sergio 2003: 140). They include summarising renditions, modifying certain elements to ensure topical Q&A continuity, generalisations, repetitions, and various noncommittal strategies, such as stock phrases and neutral finishes to conclude sentences (see Riccardi, Chapter 27, in this volume). Thus, it would appear that in this case the norm is not reproducing the content as accurately as possible, but simply “the rendition of the essentials” (Straniero Sergio 2003: 170).

Another norm that may be applied differently in press conference interpreting is the interpreter’s impartiality: “press conferences are multimedia and multimodal settings with complex implications for the interpreter: regardless of who hires the interpreter, the notion of loyalty to the client is blurred and different interests must be juggled by the interpreter” (Castillo 2015: 293). Bulut (2016) analysed the role of football interpreters working as full-time club staff in Turkey and shows that expectations differ considerably from the ones reflected in the codes of ethics of leading professional associations (see also Horváth & Tryuk, Chapter 22, in this volume). In this context, staff interpreters are expected to be team fans and to show an emotional attachment to the club, which has repercussions on their professional identity (see Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume); more specifically, they can be torn between the professional imperative to be accurate and their employer’s expectations that they will filter and censor potentially damaging messages conveyed by foreign coaches or players who work for the club. Baines (2018) shows that press conferences can be ethically difficult for interpreters in the English Premier League, where club media managers oversee all media activities. In interviews, media managers normally request journalists to submit their questions in writing in advance and reserve the right to edit players’ answers before publication; in order to exert some control over press conferences too, they introduce the interpreter to the player beforehand and talk about the topics that are best avoided (in some cases this practice becomes very close to actual censorship). When interpreters refuse to be “filtering agents”, they can easily become scapegoats and be replaced by another interpreter willing to toe the line. Such dynamics may be found in other settings as well, such as in military and church interpreting.

Conclusion

This chapter began by analysing the key characteristics of press conferences as communicative situations and then moved on to highlight the main challenges for interpreters. Although press conference interpreting shares some challenges with all other interpreting assignments, such as the potentially complex or sensitive nature of topics and all the variables associated to the speakers (i.e. accent, linguistic competences, speaking ability, and so on), there are some specific features which make it especially challenging, namely the interactional format, the speed and the constant switch in speakers. Depending on the setting and the available equipment, these challenges can be tackled (with relative degrees of success) in different ways. The chapter has shown that the set-up of the interpreting service in press conferences may vary widely; therefore, interpreters working in this market niche need to be flexible and feel comfortable in a range of situations, from face-to-face consecutive and whispered interpreting to proximal interpreting in the booth to remote interpreting in absentia, with each one requiring specific strategies. Indeed, the available research has identified a number of coping strategies and even
emergency strategies in some settings. However, as this chapter has (hopefully) made clear, there is a need for more empirical data from interpreter-mediated press conferences in various settings, in order to better understand this practice and develop specific training packages.

Notes

1 See this description in relation to political press conferences:

reporters and members of the press took their seats ahead of time, waiting for the president, or in this case both political leaders, who entered from a separate door, and more often than not, stood on raised platforms in front of lecterns looking down on the members of the press.

Bhatia 2006: 179

2 According to Schegloff and Sacks:

Adjacency pairs are sequences of two utterances that are: (i) adjacent, (ii) produced by different speakers, (iii) ordered as a first pair-part and a second pair-part, and (iv) typed, so that a particular first pair-part requires a particular second or range of second pair-part action.

1973: 295–296


4 Clearly, this is also true in broadcast press conferences where interpreters are performing an instrumental function.

5 For example, Li (2018) notes that these interpreters routinely work from their native language (Chinese) to the B language (usually English) and vice versa, but, unlike their western counterparts, few of them have lived in a foreign country or spent long periods of time abroad.

References


