

# **“Seizing the surge of language by its soft, bare skull”: Simultaneous interpreting, the Truth Commission and *Country of my skull***

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## ***Abstract***

The gap between original and interpreted text remains largely uncharted, as does the gap between the actual practices and processes of interpreting and the ethical standards for the interpreting profession. In this article, I explore these two interpretive interstices, drawing upon aspects of professional simultaneous interpreting practice exemplified by interpreters for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Antjie Krog’s portrayal of this commission in her book *Country of my skull* (1998). In this article, I argue that just as *Country of my Skull* raises questions about the tensions between truth and not-truth in the process of forging a new national identity, so does the process of interpreting. Inherent in the process of interpreting is the power to manipulate truth(s), and just as we cannot but examine the effects of Krog’s voice on the Commission, so we cannot erase the voice of the interpreter in the Commission.

## **1. Introduction**

At worst unacknowledged and unnoticed, at best stigmatised as the necessary production of imperfect, subordinate reproductions of reality, the process of interpreting remains on the margins of society. Even in a multilingual society such as South Africa, the gap between original and interpreted text remains largely uncharted, and its influence on our perceptions of identity and nationhood unexplored. At the same time, there is another interpretive gap which opens up and should be examined, the gap between the actual practices and processes of interpreting and the “how to’s” and “musts” of the ethical standards for the profession. It is these two interpretive interstices that I aim to explore in this article. In my argument, I draw upon aspects of professional simultaneous interpreting practice exemplified by interpreters for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Antjie Krog’s portrayal of this commission in her book *Country of my skull* (1998).

I have two reasons for using Antjie Krog’s book; the first being the numerous references to simultaneous interpreting and interviews and comments from interpreters which Krog includes in her reportage. The second reason, however, is more interesting, and relates to the questions raised by Krog’s fictionalisation of Truth Commission testimony, and how this compares to the “truth” of these testimonies. Ultimately, as we shall see, the question whether Krog has used her power as narrator to manipulate the truth of testimonies before the Commission raises some interesting questions about our perceptions of the process of simultaneous interpreting itself, during the Commission, but also in general.

Thus I have chosen to use the quotation “seizing the surge of language by its soft, bare skull” (Krog 1998: 27) in the title of this article, as it not only captures the horror and the

immediacy of the stories told at the Truth Commission, but also explores the idea that the writer has the power to appropriate language, that the “soft bare skull” of language and of testimony can be shaped by an interpretation such as that of Krog’s. I shall argue that the process of simultaneous interpretation also involves the power to seize language by its “soft bare skull”, and that the interpreter’s voice, like Krog’s voice, cannot be disregarded in any credible portrayal of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## **2. Truth, the Commission and *Country of my skull***

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission began its hearings on April 15, 1996 and concluded most of its work in late 1998, continuing to consider amnesty requests during 1999. The Truth Commission was the fruit of protracted negotiations between politicians that culminated in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 (Government Gazette 1995). This Act established a commission which was to provide “as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights” committed between 1 March 1960 and 5 December 1993. Its mission was to hold public hearings in which the victims of human rights abuses and those who had wronged them should tell their stories. The other half of its mandate was to grant indemnity from prosecution in the courts of law to the perpetrators of crimes committed both by the champions and the enemies of apartheid, on condition that they provide “full disclosure of all knowledge pertaining to gross human rights violations”. Contrition was not required, only their full confession of the evils they had committed or authorised. (Holiday 1998: 46). Thus, there were three types of hearings conducted by the Truth Commission: human rights violation hearings, where victims’ accounts of human rights violations were heard; amnesty hearings, where the Amnesty Committee heard amnesty applications; and Section 29 hearings, which were in-camera hearings of an investigative nature (Lotriet 2002: 84).

The Commission provided a platform for victims to share their stories publicly, facing their perpetrators for the first time, in the hope that the process would help them find some closure. The Commission collected statements of gross violations of human rights from those who suffered directly, or from friends and families of those who suffered, and from those who inflicted suffering. In 1996 and 1997 some ten per cent of those who made statements concerning human-rights violations were invited to appear at public hearings and speak about their experiences. The hearings were widely broadcast in print and electronic media. In addition, public hearings were held into the roles of the military, the legal and medical systems, the media, business, and research institutes during the apartheid era. A total of some 21,000 statements were collected by the Commission, and more than 7,000 people applied for amnesty from criminal and civil prosecution for acts committed with political objectives (Ross 1998). Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a clinical psychologist who served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for two years, summarises what in her view was the most important achievement of the commission:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a unique process in that while exposing the deeds of many perpetrators, it empowered victims in a way that no court could have done. It made them the centre of its proceedings, honouring them while shaming the perpetrators. For the first time, victims enjoyed the affirmation that they were denied in

the years of apartheid. Because their experiences were validated, many victims who took the stand and spoke in public about their suffering, felt justice was restored. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Commission's work are the moving stories of forgiveness by the victims as they recounted the horrors that they suffered. When the TRC started its hearings, we never expected that there would be pronouncement of forgiveness by victims. In fact, we never expected that there would be perpetrators expressing apologies and asking for forgiveness for their horrible deeds, especially since they were not required by law to apologize. There is no doubt that South Africa's TRC will hold a special place in history.

(<http://www.sapartners.org/interviews/Gobodo-Madikizela.htm>)

Perhaps inevitably, given the commission's title, there was a great deal of public debate about what was really meant by the words "truth" and "full confession". What was the value of a victim's testimony, given its inherent bias and lack of judicial procedure? The banners hanging at the Commission's public hearings bore the slogan 'Truth, the road to reconciliation', leading many to conclude that the Commission was predicated on the assumption of a direct and unproblematic linkage between Truth and reconciliation.

Antjie Krog's book *Country of my skull* (Random House, 1998) plays an important role in widening the debate on the nature of truth and reconciliation beyond the narrow confines of the 'speak and ye shall be healed' rhetoric of reconciliation so often promoted in the Commission's work. *Country of my skull* (1998) traces the workings of the Truth Commission from its inception into law until early 1998 from particular perspectives: those of a white, Afrikaans-speaking woman, a renowned poet, and a radio journalist. In his review of the book, Mark Gevisser (*Mail and Guardian*, 1996) comments:

[Krog's] sprawling work interweaves a compelling account of the commission (she covered it for SABC radio) with personal narrative, social commentary, family history, truth commission testimony (and the literary analysis thereof), imagined conversations and shards of poetry. She shuttles, sometimes dangerously, between the methods of a poet and a journalist, and, in so doing, comes to as complex an understanding of the "truth and reconciliation" process as has been written.

For Krog the journalist, the issue of truth strikes at the core of what the Commission was all about, and at the same time was its most problematic feature. In an article on the Truth Commission for the *Electronic Mail & Guardian* entitled "I can talk about nothing else, but I don't talk about it at all" (Krog 1996), she says:

The word *truth* makes me uncomfortable. As recently as last week I had to do several retakes of a voice report for radio, because - after nine months of reporting - the word *truth* still trips the tongue. "Your voice tightens up approaching the word truth," the technical assistant said irritably. "Repeat it 20 times so that you can become familiar with it. Truth is *mos jou* job!"

I hesitate at the word. I am not used to using the word. Even when I type it, it ends up as either "turth" or "trth". I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer the word *lie*. The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there ... where the truth is closest. (...)

For Krog the poet and writer, the issue of the truth of the Commission is similarly vital. In *Country of My Skull* (Krog 1998: 16), she asks:

Will a Commission be sensitive to the word 'truth'? If its interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth, but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people's perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in the deepest sense.

But later on it becomes apparent that it is not only the truth of the Commission that is under discussion, but also the "truths" expressed in her book, and her awareness that her take on the Commission is only one, fictionalised, version of the truth, as she explains to Mark Gevisser (1996):

She explains her modus operandi in a meta-moment, following her account of a group-therapy session the SABC's truth commission reporters had to go through. One of her colleagues, reading her account, challenges her: "Hey, Antjie, that's not quite what happened at the workshop ... you're not busy with the truth!"

"I am busy with the truth," she retorts, "my truth ... quilted together from hundreds of stories that we've experienced or heard in the past two years ... In every story there is hearsay, there is the grouping together of things that didn't necessarily happen together, there are assumptions, there are exaggerations ... All of this makes up the whole country's truth. So also the lies."

And so the tension in the book between fact and fiction, between the Truth Commission itself and Krog's take on the Commission in *Country of my skull*, is revealed. The Truth Commission was presumably aimed at effecting reconciliation through establishing, as fully as possible, the truth about human rights infringements during the apartheid years - 'truth', in this context, being equated with 'facts'. The enterprise of fiction, on the other hand, reaches well beyond facts: inasmuch as it is concerned with the real (whatever may be regarded as 'real' in any given context) it presumes a process through which the real is not merely represented but imagined. What is aimed at is not a reproduction but an imagining (Brink 1998: 30-31). Clearly, this issue is core to Krog's book: she has interwoven an account of the emotional crises she experienced during the process of the Truth Commission and her personal history with the testimonies of survivors and perpetrators of apartheid atrocities. Using the transcripts from public hearings, she describes the pain of loss felt by victims, the need to record in order to recall. She writes about the difficulty of writing, the complexities of reporting when language has no words for experience, when words have to be made up to express the violations inflicted upon people. The words of witnesses become the motivations for her own writing:

I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending - you who once whispered beside me in the dark I have translated you from the dead. (Ross 1998)

As such Krog is combining two modes of life-narrative: oral testimony and written, exploratory autobiography. And this is precisely the problem for many of her critics: the fact that she abandons objective reporting in order to take centre stage. In so doing, she draws attention away from the suffering of those whose fragmented stories she represents in the book and raises a number of questions about the authority of representation and the power of authors. A second criticism is that through her retelling of the stories brought

before the Commission, the stories, which are fragments, synopses of experience, told at particular times for particular audiences, are made into coherent and generic narratives of suffering, and this process of re-telling, or even simply quoting, the stories of others in a different framework, is felt to be fundamentally wrong. (Titlestad 2001: 13, 14).

The fact that truth and its re-telling, faithful or otherwise, are crucial to both the Truth Commission itself and to *Country of my skull*, is unsurprising. What is surprising, however, is that none of the critics of the book, or indeed, any of the critics of the Truth Commission itself, discuss whether the fact that the majority of the testimonies were in fact told originally in other languages and interpreted into English might have any bearing at all on the “truth” of these testimonies. No critic asks whether the interpreters’ re-telling was fundamentally more fluent than the original telling of the stories. The interpreter’s voice, the interpreter’s subjectivity, is simply not considered.

In the next section, I shall argue that just as we cannot but examine the effects of Krog’s voice on the Commission, so we cannot erase the voice of the interpreter in the Commission.

### **3. Simultaneous interpreting in the context of the Truth Commission**

Bearing in mind that many of the victims and perpetrators testifying at the Truth Commission testified in languages other than English, how were these stories heard and understood? The answer is - through simultaneous interpreting. It is quite ironic that just as the multilingual Nuremberg Trials at the end of World War II marked the beginning of the use of simultaneous interpreting with sophisticated electronic equipment worldwide, so the first time many South Africans first became acquainted with the marvels of simultaneous interpreting was through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings: either through exposure to television news clips, or as a member of the audience at a meeting of the Commission. From April 1996 to October 1998, interpreters produced 28 412 hours or 3, 551 days of interpreting (Du Plessis & Wiegand in Lotriet 2002: 96). Using the simultaneous mode of interpreting at the Truth Commission meant that victims, perpetrators, members of the Commission itself and members of the audience, all possibly speaking different languages, could understand the proceedings with minimal delay. Using the consecutive mode of interpreting (the principal mode of interpreting used in South African courts) would have been disastrous, since everyone would have had to wait for the speaker to deliver a small section of his speech, whereupon each interpreter in turn would interpret that short chunk into up to ten other languages.

In fact, the Truth Commission, being a multilingual process, could not have operated at all without simultaneous interpreting and the use of relay interpreting from English, the pivot language of the proceedings. How can an Afrikaans-English interpreter interpret a victim’s testimony into Afrikaans if the victim is speaking Venda, for instance? How did the Xhosa interpreters interpret the words of an Afrikaans speaker into Xhosa if they did not themselves understand Afrikaans? If the source-language speech is in a language the interpreter does not understand, he or she makes use of the relay function on the

interpreter's desk, which allows this interpreter to interpret from another interpretation instead of from the original speaker's message. Thus, if a witness gives testimony in Venda, the Afrikaans interpreter simply presses the relay switch, which allows him or her to listen to the English interpretation provided by the Venda/English interpreter rather than to the floor language (Venda), and in turn to interpret from that English interpretation into Afrikaans for the Afrikaans-speaking listener. The time lag between the original speech and the final interpretation into Afrikaans for relay interpretation is double that of normal simultaneous interpretation, since the first interpreter must wait for a few seconds before beginning a meaningful interpretation into English, and then the Afrikaans interpreter waits a further few seconds before interpreting into Afrikaans. Antjie Krog captures the participants' reliance on simultaneous interpretation in the first chapter of *Country of my skull* (Krog 1998), where she describes a meeting of the Justice Portfolio Committee which is hearing public submissions on what to include in the draft legislation establishing a Truth Commission. Eugene Terre' Blanche, leader of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, speaks:

*"Laat MY ... soldate ... huis toe gaan ... (in a crescendo) sodat die weeklag van wagtende vroue en die wringende hand van kinders kan einde kry... my klere is nat van hulle trane..."* Translation! Members of Parliament, especially the exiles, ransack desks for translation equipment. They don't want to miss a word (Krog 1998: 2).

Like many non-specialists, Krog does not make the distinction between translation and interpreting, or even between simultaneous interpreting and other modes of interpreting, but uses the term *translation* generically to cover both the oral and written modes. Not that she can be blamed for this; despite its current popularity, it is important to remember how very new a field simultaneous interpreting is. Although simultaneous interpretation into foreign languages at international conferences has been the norm for years in South Africa, simultaneous interpretation into the eleven official languages has only come into its own in the last six or seven years. For this reason, I will now explain how the simultaneous interpreting process operates in some detail.

A simultaneous interpreter usually sits in a soundproof booth and works with a partner. While one interpreter is actively interpreting, the other listens and assists. The interpreters work in pairs, taking turns every 15-20 minutes, because interpreting simultaneously requires intense concentration. The term *simultaneous interpreting* itself is in fact a misnomer, in that it suggests that the interpreter is interpreting a message as he or she hears it. In fact, there is a small delay between the moment the interpreter hears a thought and the moment he or she renders that thought into the target language, because it takes time to understand the original message and produce a target-language message. Meanwhile, the speaker goes on to the next thought, so the interpreter must produce the target-language version of the first thought while processing the speaker's second thought, and so on. This delay is known as *ear-voice-span*, which refers to the time lag between listening to the chunk of original text and producing the target-language interpretation. The ear-voice span can be calculated in terms of seconds, words or syllables, and varies from about two to ten seconds, depending on individual style, the syntactic complexity of the input and on language combination (Hatim & Mason 1997: 62.) Interpreters will usually not start interpreting into the other language until they have

heard at least a predicate phrase. The longer the interpreter is able to wait before beginning the target-language version, the more information he or she will have and the more accurate the target-language version will be. But if the time lag between hearing the source-language message and reproducing it in the target language is too long, the interpreter will not be able to remember the next chunk of information.

Thus interlingual interpreting, like translation, is a distinct type of communicative event, shaped by its own goals, pressures and context of production. Just as a translation is based on a source text, an interpretation is generally constrained by the presence of a fully articulated text in another language. Generally, as explained above, a simultaneous interpreter does not have access to the entire text, but must interpret based on sequential segments of text. The interpretation is also constrained by factors such as the speed at which the source-language speaker speaks, the technicality of the topic under discussion and by text preparedness (is the speech delivered spontaneously, or prepared beforehand, and does the interpreter have access to the written speech or not?)(Wallmach 2000: 207). Add to this the enormous personal stress of interpreting some of the truly horrifying stories told by victims and perpetrators alike, and it seems clear that the interpreters did play an important role in the production of truth at the Commission. Nevertheless, there are relatively few references to interpreting or the interpreters in the Truth Commission transcripts, and in most cases these comments refer only to the mechanics of the process. The following extract from a transcript of the Truth Commission Human Rights Violations submissions held on 2 June 1997 is one of many similar examples.

DR WENDY ORR:

I would just like to explain to you how the translation devices work. You should all have access to a set of headphones and a receiver. If you don't and you do understand the language, or, you don't understand the language that is being used, please try and share. We ask that if people do understand the language that they hand their translation devices over because we would like as many people as possible to understand the proceedings.

The sound is transmitted from these devices on the stage so if you're having difficulty picking up the sound, try pointing your receiver to these devices. There are three channels, a button on the side, channel one is Afrikaans, channel two is English and channel three will be Xhosa when our Xhosa interpreters arrive, I'm afraid they haven't arrived quite yet, and the button on the other side is the volume button. Please leave these devices on your chairs when you leave the hall for tea or lunch, or at the end of the day because the receivers have to be recharged every day and are of no use to you outside of this hall.

Source: <http://www.truth.org.za>

Dr Orr's comments imply that interpreting is a simple and automatic process; it is only necessary to explain how the interpreting equipment works in order to operate a 'channel' which takes in words in one language and turns them, machine-like, into words of another language without apparent effort. The interpreters themselves are completely depersonalised - except of course when they happen to arrive late!

So if interpreting is such a vital part of the process, why is it so invisible? In the next section I argue that the answer lies in attitudes which are far less tangible than would first appear. Accordingly, I re-examine the question of authorship, truth and fidelity in the

context of translation and interpreting.

#### **4. A philosophical dilemma: authorship, truth and fidelity in translation and interpreting**

Interlingual interpreting and translation have always played an invidious role in society, always been regarded as a necessary evil: 'necessary' in light of the vital bridging of linguistic and cultural barriers, and 'evil', because they constitute profoundly political acts, involving relations of power and domination, and thus are not the same as their originals and can never be the same. Clearly, interpreting and translation take place in a specific social and historical context that informs and structures them (just as they inform and structure other creative processes). But this context becomes doubly complicated since, by definition, two languages and thus two cultures and two societies are involved (Jacquemond 1992: 139). Because translation and interpreting traverse the boundaries between cultures, by their very nature they represent the possibility of violating an established social order by introducing new ideas, new characteristics, new ideologies into the target culture. It is precisely to close this gap and avoid the ever-present danger of transgression that those employing translators or interpreters have tried to eliminate by emphasising absolute faithfulness to the sovereign original. As Lori Chamberlain (1992: 67) states:

the reason translation is [now] so over-coded, so over-regulated, is that it threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction which is so essential to the establishment of power. Translations can, in short, masquerade as originals, thereby short-circuiting the system.

In order to prevent this from happening, conventional discourse about translation and interpreting assumes the absolute sovereignty of the original and the subservience of the translation, the necessity for faithfulness to the original, the idea that translation and interpreting preserve meaning across languages, and, of course, the necessity for the translator or interpreter to remain invisible in the translation or interpreting process. In fact, perhaps the most important reason for the marginalisation of translation is its offence against the prevailing concept of authorship, as Venuti (1998:31) points out:

Whereas authorship is generally defined as originality, self-expression in a unique text, translation is derivative, neither self-expression or unique: it imitates another text. Given the reigning concept of authorship, translation provokes the fear of inauthenticity, distortion, contamination. Yet insofar as the translator must focus on the linguistic and cultural constituents of the foreign text, translation may also provoke the fear that the foreign author is not original, but derivative, fundamentally dependent on pre-existing materials. It is partly to quell these fears that translation practices in English cultures (among many others) have routinely aimed for their own concealment. In practice the fact of translation is erased by suppressing the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, assimilating it to dominant values in the target-language culture, making it recognizable and therefore seemingly untranslated. With this domestication the translated text passes for the original, an expression of the foreign author's intention.

Venuti (1998: 31-2) also believes that translation (and by extension, interpreting) conflict with a still prevailing concept of scholarship that rests on the assumption of original

authorship. Whereas this scholarship seeks to ascertain the authorial intention that constitutes originality, translation not only deviates from that intention, but substitutes others: it aims to address a different audience by answering to the constraints of a different language and culture. Instead of enabling a true and disinterested understanding of the foreign text, translation therefore provokes the fear of error, amateurism, opportunism - an abusive exploitation of originality. And insofar as the translator focuses on the linguistic and cultural constituents of the foreign text, translation provokes the fear that authorial intention cannot possibly control their meaning and social functioning. Under the burden of these fears, translation has long been neglected in the study of literature, even today, where the influx of poststructuralist thinking has decisively questioned author-oriented literary theory and criticism. Whether humanist or poststructuralist, contemporary scholarship tends to assume that translation does not offer a true understanding of the foreign text or a valuable contribution to the knowledge of literature. So perhaps literary critics' failure to examine the influence of the translator or interpreter's voice is less surprising than would appear.

So what is the nature of the gap between original and translation, and under what circumstances can that margin be prised open? In his paper "Shall I apologise translation?", Theo Hermans (2001) describes the gap between the original and its translation as being real, insidious and significant. It has ethical and ideological dimensions, and is not really a matter of rhetoric or style, of expressive means or idiolect. Rather, it is a matter of voice and value, of a speaking subject positioning itself in relation to, and at a critical distance from, even in direct opposition to the source text. Hermans finds Plato's discussion of mimetic versus diegetic narration useful in understanding the nature of this gap. In *The Republic*, Book 3, Chapter 6, Plato discusses two different ways of presenting a story. He distinguishes between "pure narration" or *diegesis* and "a narrative that is effected through imitation", or *mimesis* (Plato 1994: 224-231). In pure or diegetic narration "the poet himself is the speaker and does not even attempt to suggest to us that anyone but himself is speaking" (Plato 1994: 227). In mimetic narration, on the other hand, "he delivers a speech as if he were someone else, ... assimilating his diction as far as possible to that of the person whom he announces as about to speak" (Plato 1994: 227). When in a narrative a character's words have to be reported, mimetic narration will use direct speech, quoting the character verbatim, as it were; diegetic narration employs indirect discourse, in which we continually hear the poet's own voice. Plato's interlocutor concludes correctly that diegetic narration is what occurs in narrative poems, and mimetic narration is what happens in plays. Actors enact the actions and speak the words of the characters as if those characters were real people whose words the actors borrow; the actors' speaking imitates the words of the characters. This analogy is an apt one for translation and interpreting too. What distinguishes translation and interpreting from original composition is mainly the closeness of the mimetic relationship to the other text: translation and interpreting are governed by the goal of imitation, whereas composition is free, relatively speaking, to create.

But when Plato says that the actor "assimilates his diction *as far as possible* to that of the person whom he announces as about to speak", he is admitting at the same time that there will always remain a margin between the two, however small (Hermans 2001). In other

words, no matter how much an actor attempts to mirror the original, his words will always be filtered through his actor's persona, and will always reflect his personal interpretation. The same applies to translation and interpretation. The following quotation from *Country of my Skull* (Krog 1998: 220), where Antjie Krog interviews one of the Truth Commission interpreters, illustrates this point admirably:

It is quite interesting to sit in that booth. You're aware that you are becoming an actor, but you know people will say afterwards: "Lebohang, you were really smoking - what was going on?" And you didn't even realise that you were acting - you know, you are just looking at the victim as he is speaking and unconsciously you end up throwing up your hands as he throws his, you end up nodding your head when he nods... But it becomes very difficult to interpret when they are crying, then they speak in instalments. He says something, then he keeps quiet and he starts again ... you have to bring the pieces together. (Lebohang Mathibela, interpreter of the Shepherd's Tale)

Mathibela clearly demonstrates the mimetic aims of simultaneous interpreting - "you know, you are just looking at the victim as he is speaking and unconsciously you end up throwing up your hands as he throws his, you end up nodding your head when he nods." But in his awareness that on occasion the interpreter is required to "bring the pieces together", Mathibela also alludes to the influence of the mode of interpreting and the setting on the interpreting strategies he uses. Meaning is considered to be more important than form, particularly in a conference context where the simultaneous mode is being used (Shlesinger 2000: 7). In other words, maximising the communication impact of the speech for the listeners (while at the same time ensuring maximum accuracy to the original) is generally considered to be the most important rule in a conference setting (Gile 1995). No matter how much he attempts to mirror the original, Mathibela's work, like those of any interpreter, will always reflect his personal interpretation. Thus, like Hermans, I would argue that interpreting and translation do not constitute pure imitation. If mimetic speaking still leaves a differential margin, an interstice between itself and the speech being imitated, even if translators and interpreters attempt to mimic their author's words, like actors, assimilating their own words "as far as possible" to their authors' words, there will always be a gap between original and translation - and this gap is not one of language but of voice, of a speaking subject.

But exposing the gap between original and interpretation causes another interpretive gap to open up, the gap between the "how to's" and "musts" of the ethical standards for the profession and the actual practices and processes of interpreting. My interest here is not in the deliberate or conscious exploitation of the interpretive gap between source and target text, but in the manifestations of that gap when it is a natural part of the transfer process, or when the exploitation of that gap is prescribed by professional norms.

##### **5. An ethical dilemma: the gap between the ethical standards for the profession and actual interpreting practice**

Ethical behaviour in interpreting is becoming an ever more serious topic of discussion and debate as interpreters organise associations and try to professionalise. Every professional association sets up standards for its practitioners in order both to safeguard the welfare of its clients and to ensure that the professional activities of its members are

of a high standard and that the profession has a high status in the eyes of society. Professionals thus formulate codes of ethics which provide guidelines according to which they should act. These codes of ethics, whether for conference interpreters, court interpreters, liaison interpreters or translators, all contain very similar stipulations. For interpreters, as for translators, the chief ethical rules of the profession relate to four key aspects: accuracy, impartiality, confidentiality and accountability. These guidelines have to do with protecting the client as well as the translator or interpreter. Interpreters must:

- perform assignments **accurately** and **completely**:  
Interpreting must be carried out faithfully and completely. Information must not be changed or altered in any way (no additions or deletions). The emotion and tone of the original must be maintained and conveyed in the target language. Offensive and/or vulgar language must be preserved
- remain **neutral** and **impartial** in the interpreting situation:  
The interpreter must remain professionally detached from the participants in the interpreting situation. Displays of emotion, bias or personal opinion should be avoided, and an interpreter should never offer legal advice. It is not the interpreter's responsibility to evaluate the value or truth of the testimony nor to make judgements about guilt or innocence.
- observe the obligation to **secrecy** and **confidentiality**:  
Interpreters must maintain professional secrecy, and take care not to reveal any information learned during the course of an assignment, nor to discuss an assignment while it is in progress.
- be **accountable**:  
Interpreters should only accept assignments they are competent to perform; avoid conflict of interest (not have any personal or professional ties with the participants); and strive to maintain and develop their ability as interpreters.

(Schweda Nicholson & Martinsen 1995:264)

Returning to the metaphors which relate interpreting to a channel, a conduit or a machine, all of the qualities of these inanimate objects, except perhaps accountability, seem very apt. It would seem that the expectations of users of interpreters coincide with the ethical principles which interpreters promise to obey when they become part of a professional association. These ethical standards are clearly formulated, they are set up by interpreters themselves, and it should surely be quite easy to follow them. So where's the problem? The problem is that these ethical rules do not help interpreters to solve individual ethical or linguistic problems that they encounter while actually interpreting. The individual requirements of the task at hand often do not correspond with the ethical rules interpreters are required to follow.

In order to explain this, it is necessary to examine ethical questions relating to interpreting or translation on two levels, the individual level and the professional level.

On a professional level, codes of ethics are generally written for the control of interpreting as a profession, regulating an interpreter's relations with other interpreters, with clients and with questions like official secrets. This calls for an interpreter, or rather a group of interpreters, who take responsibility for their work and have juridical and fiscal status and an explicit professional presence. But on the individual level, the ideal interpreter remains an invisible linguistic figure. What seems to be required on the individual level is that the interpreter show some kind of individual loyalty towards a source language speaker or message, and that loyalty must somehow be balanced against similar loyalty to the target language listener and the target language message. How the interpreter should balance these conflicting loyalties is not made clear at all. In fact, Anthony Pym goes so far as to suggest that the easiest way to avoid the individual translator's ethical dilemma of divided loyalty between source and target cultures is simply to omit the figure of the individual translator, thereby avoiding the issue of the subjectivity originally called upon to make such decisions! In accordance with this view, an ethics of anonymity would have the translator remain an essentially passive entity with no identity beyond his or her professional identity (Pym 1992). Andrew Chesterman (1997:169) makes the point that the invisibility issue is a very important one, "as it also concerns the translator's role in society, the translator's status and power, the translator's rights. Invisible translators, who seek to efface themselves textually, also tend to get effaced socially."

Which is why the code of ethics of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) contains references to collective bargaining, conditions of work and pay, the necessity to ask for an interpreter's permission to record his or her interpretation, the number of booths that should be used, etc. but contains no references as to how individuals should actually interpret. Codes of ethics would seem to contain a paradox: the implicit anonymity of the individual level would seem to be overridden by a call to explicit professional presence on the group level (Pym 1992). Codes of ethics do clearly highlight the virtues of loyalty and trustworthiness, but they do not generally enter into any of the specific aspects of the translator's task (Chesterman 2001: 150) As such, they leave a great degree of discretion to the individual. And so, although codes of ethics are very useful to the profession, for instance in persuading clients that interpreters belonging to a particular association adhere to higher professional standards than others, and are therefore more trustworthy than non-members, the ethical principles of accuracy, impartiality, confidentiality and accountability, while being very worthy aims in theory, do not in themselves guarantee that an interpreter will be able to perform in an actual interpreting situation when he or she has to make ethical decisions relating to a specific task or setting.

## **6. Actual practice - re-examining accuracy, impartiality and accountability**

So let us revisit the notion that the interpreter should be a 'channel' or a 'machine' and compare this with some observations of how interpreters operate in practice. Court interpreters are strongly obliged to adhere to the principles of accuracy and impartiality when interpreting, more so than conference interpreters or liaison interpreters. The legal system requires that court interpreters will interpret everything they hear 'verbatim' or

word for word so that a state of complete understanding is achieved between the parties concerned. The interpreter is not a person, but a channel through which one language is transferred into another. Even the new South African constitution, Act 108 of 1996, which protects the language rights of a defendant and/or witness who is not conversant with the language of the court and entitles him to court interpreting in S35(3)(k), omits anything that resembles protection for the court interpreter, and does not even allude to the role of the court interpreter (except of course to mention the fact that court interpreting services are needed) (Moeketsi 1999). For the law, the only acceptable interpretation is a 'literal' one. The law sees the interpreter as a conduit rather than as a linguistic mediator who is trained to have an awareness of multiple meanings according to context and then to make communicative choices between those meanings. However, as Moeketsi's research on court interpreters indicates, even court interpreters are sometimes forced to deviate from the four key ethical principles when performing their duties. The following example relates to the role played by the court interpreter in establishing the language preferences of the defendant.

During arraignment in one case, after the prosecutor and the court orderly had called three co-defendants into the dock, the court interpreter enquired from the three about their language preferences. He did it by asking the question "Which language do you speak?" in Sesotho (*O bua puo efe?*) and IsiZulu (*Ukhuluma luphi ulimi?*), two languages from the two main African language families, Sotho and Nguni, thereby covering a broad spectrum of seven out of the nine official African languages. Thereafter, he established the identity of each defendant to make sure that the correct person was in the dock. He then arranged them in their correct numerical order as defendants number one, two and three (Moeketsi 1999).

These functions have to do with being an officer of the court, and are obviously not included in the conventional meaning of court interpreting. The code of ethics prescribes that the interpreter must remain professionally detached from the participants in the interpreting situation, and should not add or omit any information. The question therefore arises whether an interpreter who performs these tasks, of his own accord, should be regarded as crossing the professional line, or is he a necessary member of the courtroom personnel whose function it is to see to the smooth running of criminal trials (Moeketsi 1999)? A further example is a clear violation of the principle of accuracy:

Magistrate: Do you have a lawyer?  
Interpreter: O ne mmuelli na? Lekgotla lena le o dumella ho ipatelela mmuelli, mme ha o se na tjhelete o ka sebedisa diloyana tse leshwang ke mmuso.  
Interpreter's interpretation:  
Do you have a legal representative? This court allows you to seek your own lawyer. If you do not have money, you can use the lawyers paid for by the state (Moeketsi 2000: 235).

Here, the court interpreter added information to the magistrate's question, knowing that the magistrate's failure to communicate the fact that the accused has the right to defence counsel of his choice or to a lawyer from the Legal Aid Board is an omission that could lead to the case being thrown out of court. Again, this is an individual ethical dilemma for the court interpreter. Is he expected to behave like a conduit and transfer only the source message to the listener in the target language, or should he take it upon himself to rectify

the obviously unacceptable situation and supply the crucial information, thereby saving the magistrate from dereliction of duty and protecting the accused from an unfair trial? (Moeketsi 2000: 235)

The question of using direct speech is another fundamental aspect of professional practice which is aimed at preserving the accuracy of the source language message, but also at promoting impartiality on the part of the interpreter. Interpreters are required to use the “I” form, directly and completely interpreting the voice of the speaker. They should not report on what is being said, but should rather interpret as if they themselves are the speaker. Using the first person is also supposed to reduce the risk of the interpreter perhaps subconsciously permitting his or her own personal attitudes or knowledge to influence the interpreting.

But using direct speech as an interpreter can sometimes cause problems, by far the most difficult of which is the fact that using “I” makes the interpreter identify much more closely with what is being said than would be the case if the interpreter were able to create some distance between himself and the client by using the third person. In the foreword to the Truth Commission report Archbishop Tutu, chairperson of the Commission, clearly recognises this:

It has been a gruelling job of work that has taken a physical, mental and psychological toll. We have borne a heavy burden as we have taken onto ourselves the anguish, the awfulness, and the sheer evil of it all. The interpreters have, for instance, had the trauma of not just hearing or reading about the atrocities, but have had to speak in the first person as either a victim or the perpetrator:

*They undressed me and opened a drawer and shoved my breast into the drawer which they then slammed shut on my nipple! [or] I drugged his coffee, then I shot him in the head. Then I burned his body. Whilst we were doing this, watching his body burn, we were enjoying a braai on the other side.*

The chief of the section that typed the transcripts of the hearings told me:

*As you type, you don't know you are crying until you feel and see the tears falling on your hands.*

<http://www.mg.co.za/mg/projects/trc/1chap1.htm>

Like Tutu, Krog accords unusual prominence to the role played by the interpreters in the Commission. Her interviews with Truth Commission interpreters and her portrayal of the difficulties and trauma involved in interpreting for the Truth Commission provide some very interesting insights, and also highlight a number of important issues which relate to interpreting practice. She confirms what Tutu says in his report, that interpreters find it very difficult to be a neutral intermediary, to simply be a channel, under conditions of extreme emotion:

At Tzaneen a young Tswana interpreter is interviewed. He holds on to the table top, his other hand moves restlessly in his lap. 'It is difficult to interpret victim hearings,' he says, 'because you use the first person all the time. I have no

distance when I say "I" ... it runs through me with I.'

'Now how do you survive it?'

'I don't. After the first three months of hearings, my wife and baby left me because of my violent outbursts. The Truth Commission provided counselling and I was advised to stop. But I don't want to. This is my history, and I want to be part of it - until the end.'

(Krog 1998:  
129)

The interpreter in this example, faced with an extremely stressful assignment, identifies so strongly with what he has to interpret that he has utterly lost his impartiality. There is no easy solution to this dilemma: on the one hand an interpreter must use direct speech, but on the other he or she must remain impartial if he or she is to be able to interpret professionally. Briefings and debriefings can be useful in this regard. Clarifying the interpreter's role beforehand during a briefing takes a lot of pressure off the interpreter, and expressing one's feelings about a stressful assignment during debriefing can be equally valuable. Of course, another option is to refuse an assignment which the interpreter knows will be too stressful or painful to handle.

And what about terminological difficulties in interpreting? An interpreter may be fully committed as a professional interpreter to transferring meaning absolutely accurately. But what if one's language does not have the necessary terminology to hand? Again, I quote from *Country of my skull* (Krog 1998:14):

A workshop is organised for journalists who will be covering the Truth Commission and their immediate editors ... Various topics are discussed ... What about language? Do all eleven official languages have the words needed to cover the Commission? A Zulu-speaking colleague loses his temper: 'Of course! And if the words aren't there, we'll make them up.' Make them up? He provides a list:

hit squad:	<i>abasocongi</i> - neck-twisters
massacre:	<i>isibhicongo</i> - crushed down
serial killer:	<i>umbulali onequngu</i> - addicted killer
politics:	<i>ezombusazwe</i> - matters about the ruling of the land
right-winger:	<i>untasmo-lukhuni</i> - stiff-necked
third force:	<i>ingal'enoboya</i> - a hairy arm
ambush:	<i>lalela unyendale</i> - lying down waiting to do an evil act

'Hairy arm?' I ask.

'During third force activities,' he explains, 'people said a cuff sometimes moved too high up, and the exposed arm was always hairy - that means belonging to a white man.'

Is a simultaneous interpreter who manages to create terms, or even paraphrase difficult concepts in order to communicate the message really only a channel, simply transferring what was said with little creative input? Or is the interpreter's voice one which should be acknowledged?

#### 4. Conclusion

Critics have asked about Krog's book: "Is it valid to include fiction - some call it falsehood - in a book about truth? Can her reporting be trusted given her refusal to differentiate between truth and lies? There is a slipperiness about truth. Similarly lies." (Ross 1998) Venuti (1998: 46) makes much the same point about translation (and interpreting):

Because the effects of translation are unpredictable and potentially contradictory, determined by many different cultural and social factors, it can be disruptive of scholarly canons and is likely to face repression. Yet this very unpredictability makes translated texts deserving of the scholar's attention as much as the foreign texts they translate. ... Translation, with its double allegiance to the foreign text and the domestic culture, is a reminder that no act of interpretation can be definitive for every cultural constituency, that interpretation is always local and contingent, even when housed in social institutions with the apparent rigidity of the academy...

Thus, a clear parallel can be drawn between Krog's portrayal of the Truth Commission in *Country of my skull* (1998) and the interpreting process at the Commission, and in general. For just as *Country of my Skull* raises questions about the tensions between truth and not-truth in the process of forging a new national identity, so does the process of interpreting. Both make it impossible to espouse essentialist ideas about truth, the authority of representation and the power of authors. And so, just as we cannot but examine the effects of Krog's voice on the Commission, so we cannot erase the voice of the interpreter in the Commission. I conclude with this quotation from *Country of my skull* (1998):

The truth is validated by the majority, they say. Or you bring your own version of the truth to the merciless arena of the past - only in this way does the past become thinkable, the world become habitable. And if you believe your own version, your own lie - because as narrators we all give ourselves permission to believe our own versions - how can it be said that you are being misleading? To what extent can you bring yourself not to know what you know? Eventually it is not the lie that matters, but that mechanism in yourself that allows you to accept distortions.

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