

“Shadowing”

- what, how, when, why?

The technique and practice of shadowing is an indispensable tool for both the budding and the experienced simultaneous interpreter, but it is a controversial technique and is often misunderstood or discounted. In my opinion, however, all interpreting professionals would gain greatly from spending time both considering and practising the art of shadowing.

In this brief text I shall endeavour both to describe the technique and provide some hints as to its use.

Shadowing is useful into all the interpreter’s active languages, ‘A’ and ‘B’, and can be employed to correct and refine a multitude of interpretation weaknesses – accent, delivery, voice quality, vocal range, emphasis, ‘cleanliness’ of rendition, confidence etc. etc.

However, it is important that shadowing:

- be carried out in a graduated, thorough and reasoned way
- be regularly supervised and/or assessed by both the practitioner and his or her teachers, supervisors or colleagues
- be carried out over many hours and in each of the linguistic combinations that it is desired to enhance
- be coupled with more conventional training techniques

The technique consists of spending many hours in a real or virtual booth shadowing an able and fluent speaker of the target language. As the goal is to replicate the neurological and intellectual demands of simultaneous interpretation, a simple laptop/ipod/headphone combination will suffice, in the absence of a true booth. Using MP3/MP4 or flash files, DVDs, CDs or audio cassettes, choose speakers who are expressing themselves in their mother tongue and who have an excellent mastery thereof, without strong regional accents, and with a gift of oratory which allows full expression of the native cadences of the language. It cannot be over-emphasised that your chosen speaker must be carefully selected, as a function of accent, elocution, delivery, register etc.

This is an excellent technique at many levels, as (this being a marked trend among recent neuro-linguistic and neurological expert studies) shadowing involves some 80% of the neuro-linguistic operations involved in simultaneous interpretation, the only factor missing being that of language transfer.

Shadowing initially involves repeating the words of the speaker without modification. This allows the interpreter's brain, ears and mouth, working as they do in concert, to begin to reproduce the sounds and rhythms of the target language, without conscious mental effort, and begins to create the 'linguistic muscle memory' naturally acquired by children learning their own tongue. This will require many tens of hours of actual speech production – it is essential that the language actually be voiced, or the exercise is useless.

It is also recommended, in the case of an actual or potential 'B' language, to shadow with a text, as it is true to say that we cannot hear or apprehend what we do not know, and if we do not hear all the articles, prepositions,

and smaller sounds that make a native speaker sound native, we will not reproduce those sounds in our shadowing, and will lose much of the potential benefit. Here again, it is useful to record your shadowing, and then replay it, comparing it to the text.

The prime goal of the exercise is to accustom brain, ears and mouth to the flawless and (eventually) effortless production of the sounds and cadences of what may be (in the case of a 'B') a foreign language. The goal here is to establish a new network of synapses and neuronal pathways, this being an essential stage in the interpreter's acquisition of each new language combination. It should not be thought that all lessons learned in the successful mastery of one combination can simply and instantaneously be transposed to another – many hours of actual practice are required for each language pair, and there are no shortcuts!

Let us now begin to look in a more concrete way at the actual practice of the technique.

While shadowing, it is important to experiment with differing levels of **time lag** or 'recul' (say from 0.5 to 5 seconds), introducing a certain elasticity to reflect the fluctuating demands imposed by the speaker and to train the brain to cope with larger or smaller linguistic buffer spaces in the language combination being employed.

At the same time, gradually introduce **expressions of your own**, allowing for varying semantic (but of course not substantive) distance from the speaker. At one extreme you may wish to decide in advance to modify one or two words per sentence, and at the other to leave only one or two words unchanged.

In order to approach, in the 'B' language, the facility which characterises an experienced interpreter's work into his/her mother tongue, it is also important to train both voice and brain to ensure acceptable linguistic production while mental processing efforts are required elsewhere.

To this end, it is useful while shadowing to practice (for example) writing **numerical sequences** involving fixed gradations (1, 3, 5, 7... or 1, 6, 11, 16, 21 etc.), which can then be self-checked after the exercise, along with the recorded interpretation.

Another variant might involve writing down **poems or song lyrics**, which the interpreter knows by heart, while interpreting. Using increasingly complex sequences is doubly fruitful, and the goal, evidently, is to guarantee an acceptable level of linguistic production even while mental processing efforts are devoted to other, more noble, tasks such as actually understanding and transposing concepts and ideas! Such exercises are useless, of course, unless both spoken and written productions are assessed for accuracy and acceptability.

Many interpreters experience difficulties, in the booth, in adopting a **register or 'persona'** which differs from their own, and shadowing can be very helpful in acquiring these more thespian-related skills which can so often make the difference between a good and an excellent interpretation. Thus, shadowing speakers who are expressing joy, grief, anger, sorrow or enthusiasm, will begin to instill the required 'muscle memory' that will allow the interpreter (when the chips are down and lack of the appropriate vocabulary or register would severely damage the credibility of the interpretation) appropriately and confidently to transmit the entire message and sentiments of the speaker. To this end, it is useful to shadow speakers who are expressing strong or even excessive emotion, without fear of drifting into caricature, given that there will always be a filter or some loss of intensity between 'shadower' and 'shadowee'.

The above exercise is of particular utility in the interpreter's 'B' language, as

its extended practice helps to instill native accent and provide a more nearly instinctive feeling for register and vocabulary, in sensitive contexts where any such failures would have serious consequences. For accent correction purposes, it is preferable initially to shadow language-learning tapes/CDs, etc., because the texts are spoken slowly, thus all sounds can be easily discerned. In addition, the texts employed are simpler, but grammar and syntax are correct. An added advantage is that the text will be available to read during shadowing.

It is also useful to spend time shadowing **fast speakers**, as it is true to say that many (usually inexperienced) interpreters have difficulty in simply delivering even their native language rapidly, clearly and without stumbling, especially when obliged to adopt a cadence which is not their own. It goes without saying that this difficulty is exacerbated into the 'B' language.

It is my hope that the above hints and descriptions will help you in your interpreting life, and endow you with increased facility and confidence in all your active languages, and in all registers. I should again stress the importance of shadowing, and of spending considerable amounts of time on this exercise, to enable the brain to integrate it in a reflexive, automatic way, clearing the way for more complex intellectual operations while actually interpreting.

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