

Exploring norms in simultaneous interpreting

Jana Zidar Forte

Povzetek

V opisnem prevodoslovju so norme tisto, kar “usmerja prevajanje in sprejemanje prevodov” (Pym 2009), prvi pa se je z njimi ukvarjal Toury (1995), ko je preučeval različne odločitve, ki jih prevajalci sprejmejo med prevajanjem in vodijo do končnega rezultata. Ta koncept so mnogi raziskovalci uvedli tudi na splošno področje tolmačenja (Shlesinger 1989, Chesterman 1999, Gile 1999) in še ožje, na področje simultanege tolmačenja (Diriker 1999, Marzocchi 2005, Zwischenberger 2015), kjer se vprašanje norm pogosto povezuje tudi s kakovostjo in strokovnostjo. Po raziskovalni metodi, ki jo zagovarja Gile (1999), so v pričujočem članku predstavljene norme pri simultanem tolmačenju na podlagi t.i. zunajbesedilnih virov (Toury 1995), tj. opažanj, ki so bila zbrana v spletni anketi, na katero je odgovorilo 180 tolmačev ter učiteljev in študentov tolmačenja. Med različnimi skupinami so opazne manjše razlike, tudi med formalno usposobljenimi tolmači in tolmači brez formalne tolmaške izobrazbe, vendar skupni rezultati analize nakazujejo, da pri simultanem tolmačenju veljajo sorazmerno jasne in dobro uveljavljene norme. Kljub temu da je tolmačenje govorna oblika prevajanja, se zdi, da tolmaške norme sovpadajo z normami pri pisnem prevajanju, saj je glavni poudarek na zvesto predanem sporočilu, ustrezni slovnici in tekočem podajanju.

Ključne besede: simultano tolmačenje, tolmači, norme, pričakovanja, kakovost

1 ON NORM SETTING AND NORM EXTRACTION IN INTERPRETING

Studies of simultaneous interpreting generally favoured the systemic approach as advocated within descriptive translation studies, especially the focus on translation/interpreting process and results. The notion of norms was perceived as an explanatory tool to account for the diverse ways in which translation is historically, socially and culturally determined (Toury 1999). Beside preliminary and operational norms advocated by Toury (1995), Chesterman (1993) proposed a more detailed distinction within operational norms, namely professional norms at the level of the translator's role and the relation between the source text and the target text, and expectancy norms pertaining to what is expected from a translation product to be recognised as such.

In one of her early papers on applying translation theory premises to interpreting, Shlesinger (1989) first expressed doubt whether norms could even be applicable to interpreting behaviour wondering whether interpreters' behaviour could be determined solely by personal preferences (idiosyncrasies) or cognitive constraints, particularly in simultaneous interpreting. Harris (1990), on the contrary, claimed that all interpreters are bound by a fundamental norm of "acting as an honest spokesperson", which implies conveying ideas and manners of the speaker as accurately as possible. According to him, interpreters are expected to act in a certain way, and the fact that this expectation is shared by practitioners and scholars testifies, in his view, to the psychological reality of norms in interpreting. Among the norms he listed were interpreting in the first person, interpreting in pair where each turn should not exceed 20-30 minutes, and only interpreting into one's A language.¹

According to Gile, research on norms in conference interpreting should not necessarily "rely on large speech corpora" (1999: 100) and can instead be conducted by analysing extratextual sources, in particular "by asking interpreters about norms, by reading didactic, descriptive and narrative texts about interpreting" (ibid.).

The first interpreting studies scholar to try to explore norms in interpreting through a variety of indirect or extratextual resources, was Ebru Diriker (1999) who analysed scholarly discourse on simultaneous interpreting by applying the critical discourse analysis approach. In her later research, she extended the investigation to cover discourse by professional organisations, the media, academia

¹ This used to be the norm also in interpreter training institutions in the Western Europe, whereas today's reality, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe calls for the so called *retour* interpreting or interpreting into a B language, i. e. interpreting from mother tongue (A language) into a strong foreign language in which interpreters have a near native competence (see the list of language profiles in demand with EU interpreting services of the Interinstitutional Executive committee http://europa.eu/interpretation/doc/language_profiles.pdf; Cf. Pokorn 2005).

outside translation studies, etc. (Diriker 2003 and 2004). In her work, she explicitly mentioned questionnaires (1999: 78) as a means of gaining a better understanding of the norms as advocated by those within the interpreting field and those outside of it.

Another source for analysing discourse and deducing norms in interpreting are codes of conduct and similar pronouncements by interpreting services and professional organisations, which were investigated by Marzocchi (2005) who extended the concept of norms to include the notion of ethics. In her PhD, Duflou (2007) went even further and set out to explore the wider context of socio-professional norms of conference interpreters working for the European Commission and the European Parliament by examining both textual sources (interpretation corpora) and extratextual sources (metadiscourse of the interpreting service of both EU institutions, in-depth interviews with staff interpreters).

As a follow-up on her quality related research, Zwischenberger (2015) explored the omnipotent *supernorm* in conference interpreting stating that interpreting is “governed by role-related normative expectations which ultimately can all be traced back to the metaphoric concept of interpreters as conduits” (2015: 90). She supported the validity of the super-norm by selected findings from her web-based survey among professional interpreters – members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) as “probably the most influential and powerful norm-setting authority in the field” (ibid.).

Chesterman (1993: 5-7) argues that norms can be validated either by their very existence or by a norm authority, although his list of norm authorities for the translation profession includes teachers, examiners, critics and translation professionals themselves omitting professional organisations. But, as Zwischenberger states it is precisely these associations, and in particular AIIC that act as “more than just an implicit force in the establishment of norms” (2015: 94) as their members are required to obey the association’s rules and regulations as stipulated in its Code of professional ethics,² and non-compliance with those leads to sanctions. Furthermore, the international association’s rules and regulations serve as an example for many national professional associations, thus further reaffirming the norm-setting role of AIIC (e. g. the Slovene Association of Conference Interpreters³ or the Croatian Society of Conference Interpreters).⁴

The present paper wishes to present the norm related part of a case study involving

2 See AIIC’s Code of professional ethics <https://aiic.net/page/6724/code-of-professional-ethics-2018-version/lang/1> Access September 2018.

3 See Code of conduct, Professional Standard and Working Conditions of ZKTS <https://www.zkts.si/o-zkts/kodeks-poklicne-etike-poklicni-standardi-in-delovni-pogoji> Access September 2018.

4 See the section About the Society <http://www.hdkp.hr/hr/drustvo/> Access September 2018.

a survey⁵ among different groups within the interpreting profession as explained below, which corroborates Zwischenberger's notion of interpreting supernorm (2015) and demonstrates that it extends well beyond AIIC's remit.

2 PRESENTATION OF METHOD

The web-based survey was conducted from January to April 2015 and involved practising professional interpreters, interpreter trainers and assessors in exams, as well as interpreter trainees. In total, the studied sample included 181 respondents, of which 34 trainees and 147 practising interpreters and trainers with an average of 11 years of professional experience in conference interpreting. 74% of respondents were formally trained conference interpreters, 26% had obtained other linguistic qualifications and degrees in other fields.

The respondents' main mother tongues (A language) were Slovenian (21%), Spanish (17%), English (12%), French and Italian (both 8%), while other languages obtained less than 4% (Portuguese, Romanian, German, Russian, Swedish, etc.).

The survey used a combination of questions, mostly related to interpreting competence, but two of the questions can be directly linked also to the issue of norm in interpreting. The first was an open question asking the respondents to list four characteristics of good simultaneous interpretation (attempt to describe what is the norm), and the second one asking them to assess the seriousness of flaws (deviations from the norm).

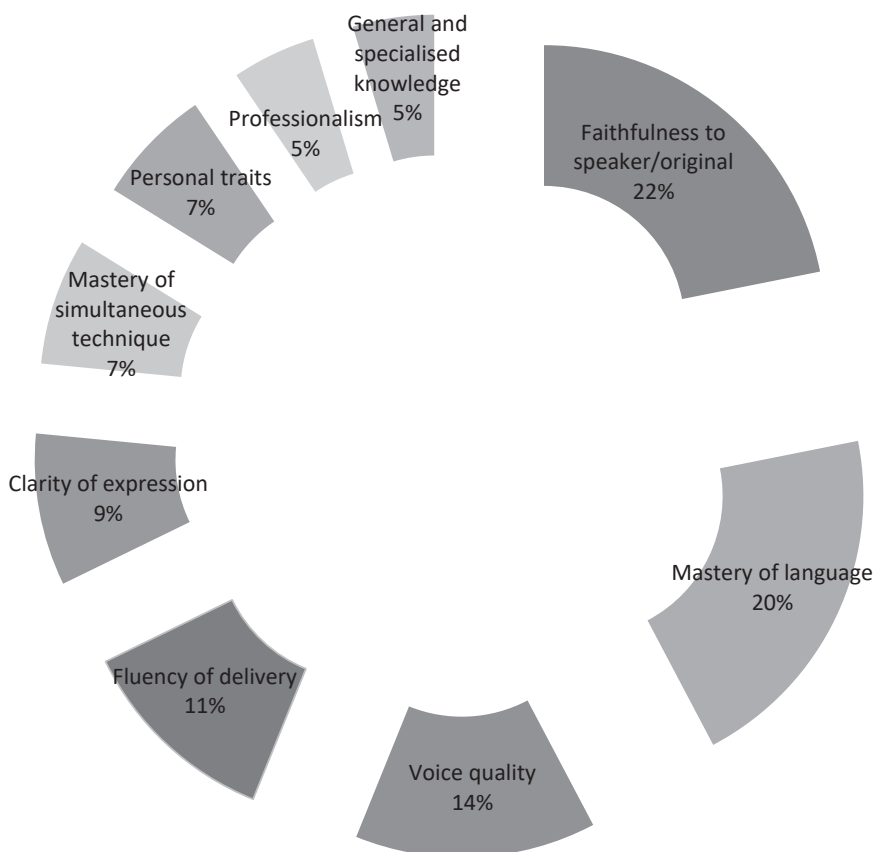
3 OVERVIEW OF NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS

3.1 What four characteristics describe good simultaneous interpreting?

Despite the open nature of the question, the survey respondents gave surprisingly homogeneous answers using very similar words or phrases that were later regrouped by three independent assessors into nine distinctive categories, five of which account for 76% of the answers: faithfulness to the speaker/original (22%), mastery of language (20%), voice quality (14%), fluency of delivery (11%) and clarity of expression (9%).

⁵ As part of a PhD study, the survey primarily focused on linguistic competence, but its findings can be applied to the question of norms, too, especially the respondents' non-directly-solicited answers to the question what constitutes a good simultaneous interpreting output (see Zidar Forte 2016).

Chart 1: What do we expect from a good simultaneous interpreting rendition?



Under faithfulness to the speaker/original, the answers show a variety of terms but all pointing in the direction that the message of the speaker should be rendered as faithfully and accurately as possible, ranging from: *faithful, accurate, correct content, fidelity to the speaker, precise, complete* to more abstract, such as:

- *capture the spirit of the given topic/lecture,*
- *comprising as many details as possible,*
- *well understood message and content and all its nuances,*
- *proper rendition of the meaning,*
- *pass the text accurately with all the meanings and nuances of the original text.*

The category ‘Mastery of language’ comprises all the responses related to the knowledge of source language (*excellent knowledge of source language, Have a deep*

understanding of the source language) and of target language, where the responses show more variance (*Correct use of the target language, good target language product, correctness of the target language (terminology, richness of expression)*). Some respondents mentioned the knowledge of both source and target text, but the majority of answers focused on target text and included very specific normative expectations:

- *proper register (no dialect, for example)*
- *idiomatic*
- *natural expression*
- *it is grammatically structured and correct*
- *short sentences*
- *good and varied expression in the target language*
- *it has the same tone and register as the original*
- *must sound like speech in the original language*
- *finishing all sentences*

This category also encompasses answers related to correct terminology and coherence, while the answers related to clarity of expression were regrouped under a different category, ‘Clarity of expression’, as respondents appeared to regard it as a distinctive feature not directly related to language knowledge, but more to the style/manner of conveying the message (*clear ideas, clear communication, clarity – easy to understand, easy to follow, logical output*).

Quite interestingly, two other categories seemed more important to respondents: voice quality and fluency of delivery. The significance of voice and voice quality for interpreters is obvious as it is the voice that makes or breaks the relationship with the audience and garners trust the moment the interpreter starts doing his/her job, although it is generally difficult to objectively state what makes a ‘good voice’ as this seems to be a matter of subjective preferences. Nevertheless, the respondents’ answers showed rather clearly, that voice quality features among the four most prominent qualities of good interpretation. In their answers, the participants evoked *pleasant, convincing voice, easy to listen, good articulation and breathing*, as well as *adequate prosody* and *calmness*.

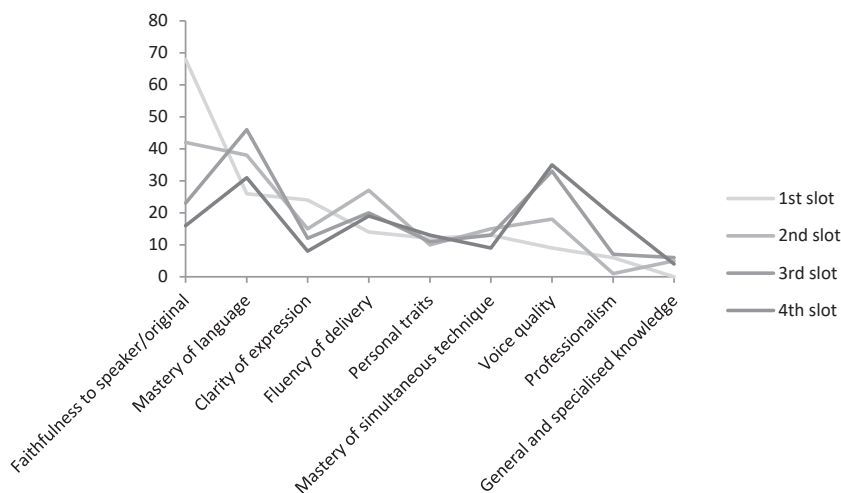
A separate category was introduced for answers related to fluency of delivery, which featured relatively strongly among the answers (11%) with very clear wording referring to the interpreters’ *fluent delivery* and *fluency*, using adjectives such as *fluent, smooth*, and substantives such as *flow, pace, speed*. Some of the answers were more detailed:

- *No fillers or uhm sounds*
- *No pauses, no silences...*
- *Without any noticeable gaps or hesitations*

The categories were defined based on common features detected in the answers and similarity in the formulations and choice of words, although there is clear overlapping between some of the categories. But a more detailed approach allowed us to better grasp what individual features the practitioners consider to constitute good simultaneous interpreting (norm).

A cumulative chart (chart 2), showing the distribution of answers according to the four offered slots, demonstrates four clear peaks for the most prominent categories. Although the respondents were not explicitly asked to rank the qualities in any particular order, it can be assumed that they started with those they intuitively value as the most important.

Chart 2: Cumulative distribution of answers on the qualities of good simultaneous interpreting.

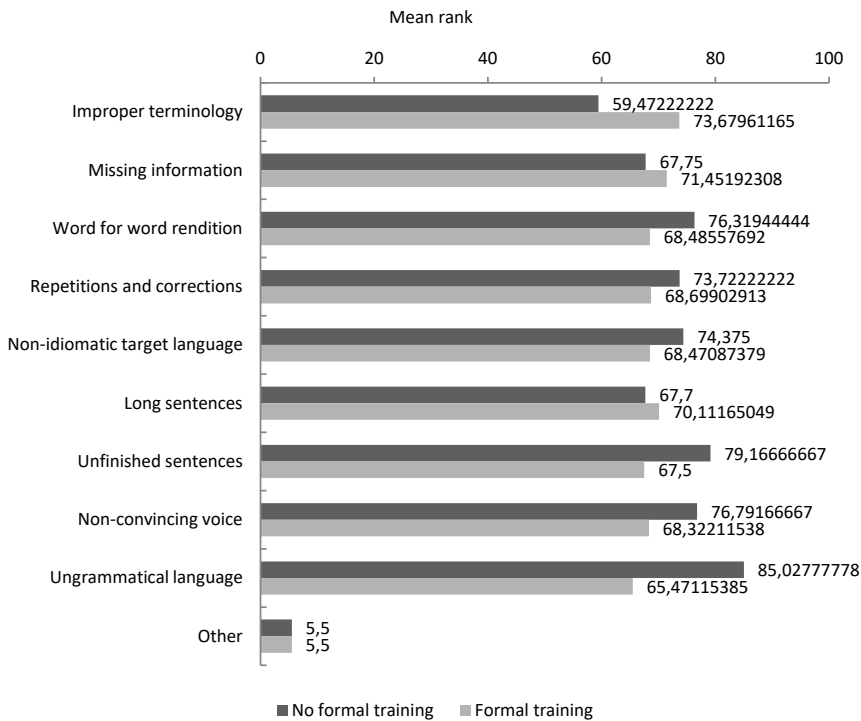


3.2 Assessment of the seriousness of flaws in simultaneous interpreting

Following is a detailed statistical analysis on how the seriousness of flaws in simultaneous interpreting (i.e. deviation from the norm) is assessed. The majority of possible flaws were related to linguistic competence and the aim of the analysis

was to examine whether any differences would emerge between the respondents according to their formal training and current status in terms of how they ranked the order of severity.

Chart 3: Assessment of the seriousness of flaws in simultaneous interpreting regarding formal interpreter training among practising interpreters (n=140)



A review of the mean ranks shows that six flaws are unacceptable to a greater degree to respondents with formal interpreter training than to respondents with no formal training. These flaws are:

- word-for-word rendition,
- repetitions and corrections,
- non-idiomatic target language,
- unfinished sentences,
- unconfident voice,
- ungrammatical language.

With the use of Mann-Whitney U test it was verified whether the differences observed when assessing the seriousness of flaws in simultaneous interpreting were also statistically significant regarding formal training. At the 0.05 level, two flaws revealed statistically significant differences:

- ungrammatical language (sig=0.005) – respondents with formal interpreter training considered the flaw less acceptable than respondents with no formal training;
- incorrect terminology (sig=0.056) – respondents with no formal interpreter training considered the flaw less acceptable than respondents with formal training.

If the level were set at 0.10, long sentences would also be considered statistically significant (sig=0.098) with formally trained respondents deeming this flaw less acceptable than respondents with no formal training.

The detailed statistical analysis conducted has confirmed that there are statistically significant differences when assessing the seriousness of flaws in simultaneous interpreting with regard to the formal training of the respondents.

Differences were observed also in the assessment of the seriousness of flaws in simultaneous interpreting between respondents' status groups.

A review of the mean ranks shows that interpreting students consider the following three flaws to be the least serious:

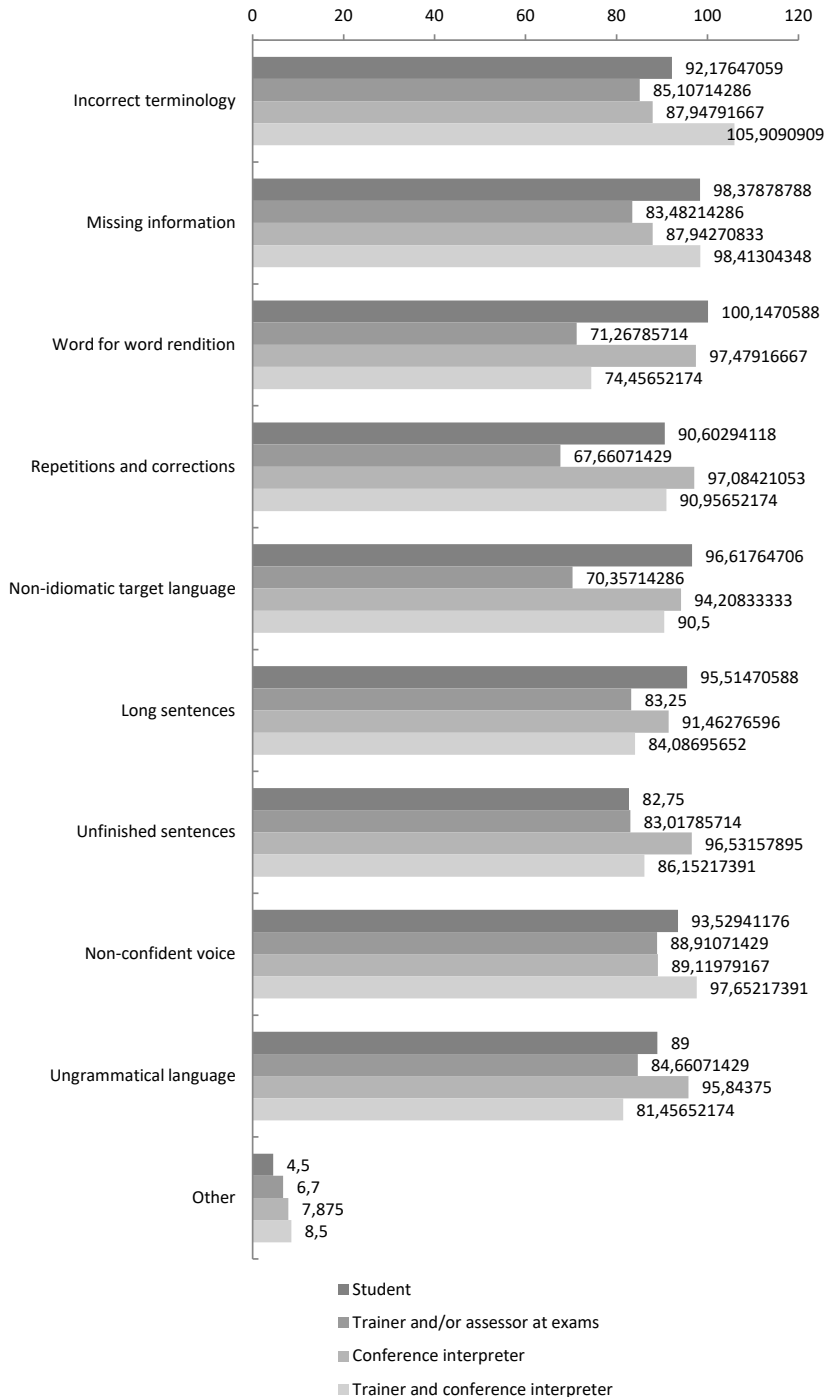
- word-for-word rendition,
- non-idiomatic target language,
- long sentences.

They consider the most serious flaw among the given options to be *unfinished sentences* which probably reflects their trainee position and the fact that this is one of the so called golden rules (Nolan 2005) they are expected to observe since the very beginning of simultaneous interpreting.

According to professional interpreters, the following three flaws are the least serious:

- repetitions and corrections,
- unfinished sentences,
- ungrammatical language.

For them, the most serious flaws are improper terminology and missing information.

Chart 4: Seriousness of flaws according to the status of respondents (n=181)

Trainers who are also professional interpreters deem the following three flaws to be the least serious:

- improper terminology,
- unconfident voice,
- other options.

They consider the most serious flaw to be word-for-word rendition.

The results show that the interpreter trainer group considers all the stated flaws to be serious, since they treat none of the flaws as the least serious or acceptable. On the other hand, they consider the following flaws to be the most serious:

- repetitions and corrections,
- non-idiomatic target language,
- word-for-word rendition.

Among the options provided, they attach less importance to unconfident voice.

The Kruskal-Wallis test was then used to verify the statistical significance of the differences observed when assessing the seriousness of flaws in simultaneous interpreting regarding status. Two of the flaws revealed statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level:

- **word-for-word rendition** (sig=0.022) – the trainer group and the group for trainers who are also professional interpreters considered this flaw to be less acceptable than professional interpreters and students;
- **repetitions and corrections** (sig=0.057) – trainers considered this flaw to be unacceptable to a greater degree than the other three groups.

The detailed statistical analysis conducted has confirmed that there are also statistically significant differences when assessing the seriousness of flaws in simultaneous interpreting with regard to the status of the respondents.

It is interesting, but somewhat also alarming, to note that students deem verbatim interpreting and non-idiomatic target language to be acceptable, whereas trainers assess these to be the most serious flaws besides repetitions and corrections. This could indicate that trainers do not ascribe sufficient importance to these shortcomings when practising with students. On the other hand, these results also indicate that there is a gap between the training programmes and the profession itself, since professional interpreters, for example, consider repetitions and corrections to be the least important error, but trainers rank them among the most important. Furthermore, professional interpreters consider incorrect

terminology and missing information to be the most serious flaws in simultaneous interpreting. Trainers who are also professional interpreters, however, partly disagree, considering improper terminology to be the least serious flaw.

Another significant difference recorded was between the students, who consider unfinished sentences to be the most serious mistake, and professional interpreters, who deem it to be the least serious, indicating a wide gap between these two groups.

These gaps show that, despite some points in common (and even regular interaction), each of the three aforementioned groups, i.e. students, interpreter trainers and professional interpreters, still have their own views as to what constitutes a serious mistake or flaw in simultaneous interpreting or a deviation from the norm. This can lead to problems during interpreter training, final exams or when entering the labour market and interacting with other professional interpreters. However, these differences may also reflect the various functions and statuses of the respondents, who find themselves at different stages of the interpreting profession (learning, training or working) and it is therefore reasonable that they give priority to different aspects and assess possible shortcomings to greater or lesser degrees of strictness.

Since the examined sample was relatively small, the findings would need to be tested on a larger and more representative sample or in an even more detailed study which includes all the relevant stakeholders.

Despite the potential shortcomings and limitations of the analysis, the result indicate that norm (and deviation from the norm) is a dynamic notion allowing for a certain degree of variability even within the profession, most obviously as a function of experience which corroborates Zwischenberger's finding that "the age and working experience of interpreters seem to go hand-in-hand with more self-confidence in handling the communication process". (Zwischenberger 2015:107)

4 THE SUPER-NORM IN CONFERENCE INTERPRETING

Conference interpreting is generally described as the practice of translating oral texts in real time in a conference setting, requiring the interpreter to demonstrate absolute loyalty to the speaker and the original. This expectation seems to be valid both within the profession (AIIC, textbook discourse) and outside, but as Diriker (2011) states there is a fundamental difference between the two types of discourse: inside the profession, careful wording is used to stress the importance

of transferring the meanings intended by the speakers, while “discourse of the outsiders has almost obsessively defined the task of the interpreters as entailing a transfer of the speaker’s words (Diriker 2011: 29).

Zwischenberger also points to a contradiction in the expectation expressed in AIIC’s code, as on the one hand, it requires absolute loyalty from the interpreters, but on the other hand interpreters are “also expected to make a speech their own” (Zwischenberger 2015: 95) focusing on making it lively and convincing, all the while reflecting the emphasis, tone and nuance of the original, which “implies the norms of the interpreter’s non-intervention and detachment” (ibid.).

In this sense, the two normative expectations of “loyalty to the speaker/original” and “detachment of the interpreter” seem to be related to the metaphoric concept of interpreters as conduits, and their primary function is “to act as a passive and emotionless channel which solely has to convey a sense that is inherent in the message as delivered by the speaker” (Zwischenberger 2015: 107). This is confirmed also by the survey results presented in this paper, in particular the choice of words and the importance attached to each of the elements (see above Chart 1 and the subsequent section with examples of respondents’ answers).

5 CONCLUSION

The survey results showed that all the respondents agree that fidelity to the original and excellent linguistic skills in target language constitute the basic norm in simultaneous interpreting. Besides fidelity and the accuracy of the message conveyed (related to the mastery of source language), the respondents pointed out linguistic competence in the target language, fluent rendition and voice quality as the most important elements of good simultaneous interpreting or the norm.

On the other hand, ungrammatical language, unfinished sentences, corrections and repetitions, all of which are typical characteristics of spoken language, were considered to be the most critical flaws in simultaneous interpreting, i.e. deviations from the norm. Furthermore, the question about flaws revealed substantial differences between the respondents, especially between those of different statuses, i.e. students, trainers and professional interpreters. The differences in their perspectives may be due to their focus on different aspects at different stages of their careers (e.g. students vs. professional interpreters). At the same time, it is somewhat alarming to note there are disagreements in the assessments made by students and trainers, who participate in the same training process, as well differences of opinion between professional interpreters and trainers, who are responsible for preparing students for their future profession.

In the question, in which the respondents were asked to select the most important elements in good interpreting, fidelity to the original speech was rated the most important, followed by fluent and confident performance. This indicates that a good impression or assessment can be achieved through a plethora of elements, and that linguistic or grammatical correctness as a criterion is noticed especially when it is impaired, which in turn proves its importance.

The survey has therefore revealed that the norm in interpreting can be broken down in several elements (e.g. knowledge of the source and target languages, clear, fluent rendition, quality of voice). As to the distinction between the written and spoken aspects of the language, the results have confirmed that some characteristics of spoken language (e.g. repetitions, corrections and hesitation) have a negative effect on the assessment of simultaneous interpreting, and that interpreters, despite operating with spoken language, are encouraged to prepare and work extensively with written texts, implying that the norm in interpreting is much closer to the norm in translation (written language) than to the norm of spoken language.

References

- Chesterman, Andrew, 1993: From »Is« to »Ought«: Laws, Norms and Strategies in Translation Studies. *Target* 1. 1–20.
- Chesterman, Andrew, 1999: Description, Explanation, Prediction: A Response to Gideon Toury and Theo Hermans. Schäffner, Christina (ed.): *Translation and Norms*. Clevedon/Philadelphia/Toronto/Sydney/Johannesburg: Multilingual Matters. 90–97.
- Diriker, Ebru, 1999: Problematizing the discourse on interpreting. A quest for norms in simultaneous interpreting. *TextconText* 13(3). 73–90.
- Diriker, Ebru, 2003: Simultaneous Conference Interpreting in the Turkish printed and electronic media. *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 12. 231–243.
- Diriker, Ebru, 2004: *De./Re-Contextualizing Conference Interpreting: Interpreters in the Ivory Tower*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin.
- Dufrou, Veerle, 2007: Norm research in conference interpreting: Some methodological aspects. Schmitt, Peter. A. and Heike E. Jüngst (eds.) *Translationsqualität*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag. 91–99.
- Harris, Brian, 1990: Norms in Interpretation. *Target* 2(1): 115–119
- Gile, Daniel, 1999: Norms in Research on Conference Interpreting: A Response to Theo Hermans and Gideon Toury. Schäffner, Christina (ed.): *Translation and Norms*. Clevedon/Philadelphia/Toronto/Sydney/Johannesburg: Multilingual Matters. 98–105
- Marzocchi, Carlo, 2005: On Norms and Ethics in the Discourse on Interpreting. *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 13. 87–108

- Nolan, James, 2005: *Interpretation: techniques and exercises*. Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.
- Pokorn, Nike K., 2005: *Challenging the Traditional Axioms, Translating into a Non-Mother Tongue*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Pym, Anthony, 2010: *Exploring translation theories*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Shlesinger, Miriam, 1989: Extending the Theory of Translation to Interpretation: Norms as a Case in Point. *Target* 1(1). 111–115.
- Toury, Gideon, 1995: *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Toury, Gideon, 1999: A Handful of Paragraphs on »Translation« and »Norms«. Schäffner, Christina (ed.): *Translation and Norms*. Clevedon /Philadelphia / Toronto/ Sydney/ Johannesburg: Multilingual Matters, 9–31.
- Zidar Forte, Jana, 2016: *Značilnosti pripravljenega govorjenega diskurza in njihov vpliv na simultano tolmačenje*. PhD dis. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta.
- Zwischenberger, Cornelia, 2015: Simultaneous Conference Interpreting and a Supernorm That Governs It All. *Meta* 60(1). 90–111.