A, B and C decoded
What characterizes interpreters' working languages?*

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Abstract

There is no agreed upon definition of the concrete linguistic skills associated with an A, B and C language in interpreters' combinations of working languages. Frameworks for performance assessment in foreign languages, while providing clear guidance on relevant subskills, do not cover the range of proficiency required for conference interpreters.

In order to find out what characterizes an A, B or C language for the purpose of conference interpreting, we have analyzed the ACTFL performance descriptors, as well as written feedback given to interpreting students on their languages.

This work has allowed us to identify a set of subcomponents of language mastery that seem determining in setting apart the A language from the B language, and the B language from the C language.

## Methods and Materials

Our study was divided into two main parts:

Part I: Analysis of the ACTFL and CEFR performance descriptors and adaptation to the requirements of interpreting.

Part II: Analysis of written feedback to identify relevant subskills for the A, B, and C language.

Data set: corpus of written feedback (4009 entries for the years 2008-2013) based on performances from B into A, C into A, and A into B and including information on language skills.. Reduced to a sample of 431 entries divided into 3 sub-corpora, A language (186), B language (143), C language (118).

Analysis: qualitative analysis of data in order to group feedback on language skills into relevant categories and assess the importance of each of these categories for the A, B and C language.

Chart 1. Correspondences between CEFR, ACTFL and Interpreting.
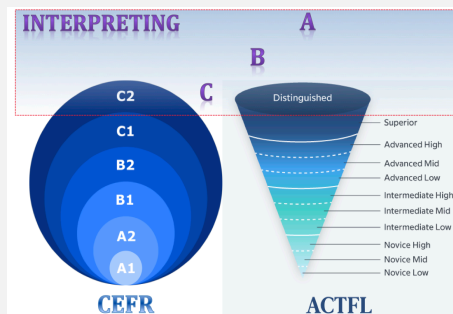
Introduction

Professional interpreters have an almost intuitive and implicit understanding of what defines an A, a B or a C language. However, the absence of clear benchmarks with regards to the language competency associated with an each of these has been a recurrent challenge in aptitude testing for conference interpreting, where incoming students are expected to 'self-declare' their language combination.

In Geneva, 150 to 200 candidates take the written entrance exams annually with a relatively small success rate (on average about 20%), which can be explained in part by the fact that many candidates sign up with an unsuitable language combination (an A or B that is not up to standard, a C language with considerable gaps in comprehension).

The aim of our study was thus to provide candidates to interpreter training programmes with language competency benchmarks, and suggest leads to refine and expand existing definitions of the A, B and C language in the interpreting literature.

Findings Part I

Our analysis of CEFR and ACTFL Performance Descriptors shows that their relevance for interpreting is higher than initially anticipated, although some adaptations are necessary in order to adapt them to the specific level expected for interpreting students (Chart 1).
Furthermore, the type, extent and frequency of language errors appear to be the most revealing criterion for language proficiency.

Findings Part II

Ten categories of relevant descriptors for A, B and C language proficiency emerged iteratively from the data (Chart 2). Based on the results for Part I the differences in frequency of errors between A, B and C language can be considered indicative of differences in language proficiency.

The most relevant categories to distinguish the B from the C language are Vocabulary (1), idiomaticity (3), and cultural awareness (6), while the A language differs from the B mainly with regards to Grammar (2), Style (4), Simplicity (8), and Accent (10) (Chart 2).

Conclusions

The A, B and C language can be characterized in terms of specific sub-components of language proficiency, which are testable and situated on a continuum.
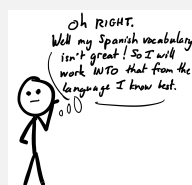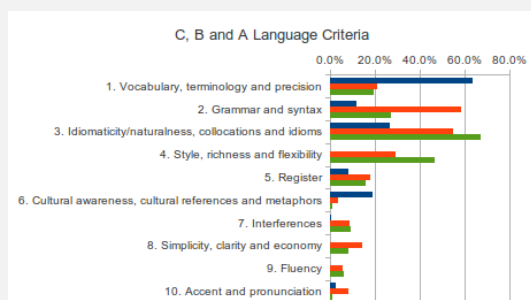
A diagnostic test can therefore be developed to screen the language combination of interpreting candidates.

The authors have developed such a test for the French language (Delgado Luchner and Loiseau 2014), which during calibration with native speakers of French, professional interpreters and interpreting students yielded accurate predictions and allowed for a distinction between French as an A, B or C language.

Further readings

ACTFL. (2012a). ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners (second printing 2015). Retrieved 22.10.2016, from http://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-performance-descriptors-language-learners
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Chart 1. Proficiency descriptors for the A, B and C language

C, B and A Language Criteria

1. Vocabulary, terminology and precision
2. Grammar and syntax
3. Idiomaticity/naturalness, collocations and idioms
4. Style, richness and flexibility
5. Register
6. Cultural awareness, cultural references and metaphors
7. Interferences
8. Simplicity, clarity and economy
9. Fluency
10. Accent and pronunciation

Oh RIGHT. Well my Spanish vocabulary isn't great! So I will work INTO that from the language I know best.

100 years of conference interpreting

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