

The Challenge of Interpreting from Chinese into English

It is much more challenging to interpret from Chinese into English than the other way round.

Firstly, there is very little sentence grammar in the Chinese language. There is no tense, no definite articles, and no singular/plural. When interpreting 'I talked to the engineers' from English into Chinese, you often say 'I talk to engineer'.

In Chinese, the concept of time is sometimes expressed by a word, but mostly, it is understood through the context.

Therefore, and secondly, Chinese speakers transition between the past and the present seamlessly when they speak. The interpreters have to decide within a split second which tense to use. Even the best interpreters are sometimes caught out.

Here is a simplified example. A Chinese visitor saw chairs in the office of their host in London and said (this is the interpreted version) 'We like these chairs, so we bought a dozen when we were in Hong Kong'. At that point, the interpreter realised that it should have been 'We liked these chairs, so we bought a dozen when we were in Hong Kong'.

Thirdly, there are very few grammatical devices in Chinese to make clear which word or words modify or go with which. On top of that, the logical order is often different. Therefore, 'the man holding an umbrella in front of the house on the street corner' becomes in Chinese 'street corner house front hold umbrella's man'. The interpreter needs to be able to dissect the sentence and re-organise it before making it grammatically correct in English. That requires extra mental effort and time.

Finally, unlike most interpreters working between major European languages, an overwhelming majority of the interpreters, working between English and Chinese, struggle with their English. Typically, they have a vocabulary in English which is smaller than that of a typical GCSE student in the UK. Despite this, they interpret at international events, or for senior people in an organisation, on a range of important topics.

Most of the best interpreters working between English and Chinese are in the UK. They are native speakers of Chinese. They speak a great deal more English and know a great deal more about the English-speaking world than their compatriots in China.