

INTERVIEW ON COMPUTERIZED ACCESS REAL-TIME TRANSLATION (CART)

How did you become involved in the CART project and then the captioning project?

1) I started my activity in the Italian Senate in 1982 as a parliamentary shorthand reporter. In the late '80s (and early '90s), I took part in international contests and developed some corrections to my technique in order to achieve higher speed with a satisfactory level of accuracy. That experience has led me to write a method manual and to teach in several educational programs. I was appointed member of the Italian Shorthand Academy, where I started studying the possibility of using the shorthand machine as a device for subtitling. In this phase the friendship with American colleagues and the information gleaned through reading your magazine have been very useful.

As you know, in Italy there were not many skilled reporters in the 1980s except in the Parliaments. Only in 1989 did we have reporting introduced in the tribunal as a consequence of the penal code reform. Reporters have grown in number and in ability to write accurately along with the dissemination of machine shorthand reporting in the country. In the early 1990s, the system (machine and human resources) was ready to meet the challenge of captioning, but only in recent years have the accuracy and the average speed grown to the necessary level.

Providing CART has been promoted in conventions held by associations of the deaf community (namely FIADDA, an association of parents of deaf children). The first performances (settled by Prof. Melani and me) were impressive and demonstrated that it was possible to reach the goal; on that basis, the system has been bettered, and we have reached excellent results. Two years ago, the deaf community held a protest march near the RAI (Italian broadcast) buildings, asking for the evening news to be subtitled. It was correctly sustained that that was their right, since the local laws (national and European) already requested the authorities to take all steps to make possible communication access by hearing-impaired individuals. Due to financial obstacles and a misconception of the problem, up to that moment there were only offline captions (movies, serials); no captions were provided for news or entertainment programs.

As a result of the protest, RAI promised that, as of the 1st of January, 2000, the evening news would be subtitled. They did not even know how to accomplish this (although many attempts were done in previous years to solicit RAI to provide that service). They asked to set up in a few days a group of people and machines for providing the service, which started experimentally one week before the X date, the 23rd of December, 1999.

As an expert of this activity, I have been called by the company that provides the service to take care of the organization of the team, of their skill improvement, of selecting the people hired, and to check the quality of the work.

Are the people who are trying to caption the same ones who are trying to provide the equivalent of CART reporting - a one-on-one or small group providing of what's happening?

2) As you can argue, the demand is not yet so great in Italy, although I feel it is about to grow. So far, the people who provide the news captions are employed for providing of CART in rare conventions. Our program aims to improve the skill of people already working at RAI and also recruits new people who want the challenge of this activity. We are also marketing, to inform broadcasting companies, universities, and other operators about the possibilities offered by realtime captioning. I presume that a lot of demand is still hidden behind the lack of awareness of the power of captioning.

I can briefly describe how the work goes on every evening. Most of the work is still done offline. Three reporters are available in a room together with two to three journalists and typists. A couple of hours before the news is broadcast, the journalists gather video or papers with the contents of the news and pass them to the shorthand reporters, who quickly provide the text file. The file is passed to the typists, who enter it in the storyboard and divide it in three-line blocks. The text blocks are ready to be transmitted when the images and the audio are broadcast. One of the journalists remains nearby in the area where the news is prepared, collecting all the materials as soon as possible and calling the room as he/she has something to dictate to the reporters. Should the content not be available for any reason before the broadcast, one journalist listens to the news and simultaneously dictates a summary to the reporter, who writes "directly to the screen."

This very complicated system is due to many factors. First, journalists protect their role and do not allow it to be performed by unauthorized people

such as the reporters. Second, the shortage of very skilled reporters has rendered impossible a preferred selection of reporters based also on their cultural skill; therefore, it is not possible to leave to them the responsibility of editing the captions. There is a dispute between those who think that deaf people cannot follow the whole transcription, what would be too fast for them, and others (I agree with this) who say that deaf people sharpen their capability of reading very quickly and should have the right to choose which part to exclude from their own attention. (Feedback from the deaf community has not been completely clear on this issue.) Although in a limited extension, some parts are therefore eliminated, and the journalists deem that they alone have the knowledge to decide which parts can be abbreviated.

When we provide CART, only one person writes. Eventually there is a turn of two people.

I can say this is a good beginning, but only a beginning. As the service will become increasingly requested and provided, many elements can be modified and improved.

From your description, the reaction from the deaf community to CART and captioning has been tremendously positive. Are they organized to push for captioning, or something similar, in Italy?

3) The deaf community in Italy (as everywhere, I suppose) is very complex and composite. There are very big associations whose aims seem to be only to provide deaf people with the monetary assistance check every month. They are not interested in a cultural improvement. They love to stay all together, have tours, live their own events, and so on. The sign language groups have a very big lobby; they refused alternative ways of accessing because they are convinced that theirs is the best way for deaf people to understand and communicate (and also, I would say, because there are many sign translators who desire to improve their earnings). The most sensitive associations are those comprised by parents of deaf children and others who believe in the integration of deaf people into the hearing community for reasons including encouraging improvement of their speaking capabilities.

We have had many contacts with universities. The cultural level of the deaf community is improving, and young people have reached the university and have asked for CART in the schools.

All in all, the response of the deaf community to the evening news captioning has been positive. I am expecting new pressures toward increasing the number of transmissions to be captioned. In May we also provided the subtitling of the talk show which followed the election day, and we have experimented with some captioning in other transmissions as well.

When you say that it is the journalist who decides what is captioned, does that mean the captions are different from what you, as a hearing person, hear them say?

4) (I have already answered.)

Many of the captioners I talk to say that the needs of the deaf are what make them strive for perfection. Of course, the people who specialize in CART find the gratitude of the people this helps is an even stronger incentive. Does that not inspire your captioners to perfect their skills?

5) Reporters doing the captioning are very good, and they are trying to perfect their skill. We must consider that it is a new experience for them. Besides, staying offline is a sort of relaxing status that does not push the writer to search for perfection. As new online programs will be captioned, higher levels will be reached both in accuracy and in speed. I would like to point out that some of the captioners, together with other Italian realtime reporters, have taken part in the international shorthand contests organized by INTERSTENO in Hannover, Germany, in July 2001 and have produced impressive results.

I would also like to hear more about how Italian translates to steno and back to written Italian. From my few studies in language, I understand that English is rather unique in its complicated spelling and similar-sounding words. Although, I remember, when learning French, that "elegante" and "et les gants," although pronounced the same, meant entirely different things. Are there no such problems in Italian?

6) More so than in French, the Italian language (as in Spanish, Portuguese, and other Latin languages) has pronunciation matching with the writing, and this renders easier the conception of a method based on orthographic principles. That means that what you write is what you see. We do not use a database for recognizing steno and definitions. We simply write the syllables on the machine and have them orthographically transcribed on the PC. This is possible because the written word in Italian corresponds to its sound. We do have a small database with some briefs for which we use strokes corresponding to syllables not existing in our language, such as xd or zk.

Our experience with the Italian method is thereby useful for reporting in other languages.

If you need more details, I will be happy to answer your questions further and to clarify or add all the information that you wish to request regarding captioning in Italy and other issues interesting for your community.

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