Interpretation or transformation? Exploring some rhetorical and ritual functions of short consecutive church interpreting.

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Short-consecutive church interpreting is a practice that is frequently employed by international Evangelical churches. Alongside other services such as translation, broadcasting and publishing, it is part of a larger language and multi-media policy, the scope of which seems proportionally connected to a church’s “call to mission”. Even though the practice has gone viral amongst conversionist Evangelical churches around the globe, constituting a defining feature of Evangelical worship, the phenomenon’s cultural and social implications have, so far, hardly been addressed. This is all the more striking as church interpreting is an environment-specific, linguistically strongly marked interpreting mode, characterized by ultra-short intervention phases that structure homiletic models in very specific ways.

I will here analyse two sequences from interpreter-mediated sermons in Evangelical Christian settings in Germany. Both display the rhetorical culmination points of ”altar calls”, a popular, albeit similarly unexplored genre of charismatic preaching that aims at creating physical ”responses” in the listeners, e.g. the raising of hands or a move towards the altar and designated care givers. One such sequence is taken from Billy Graham’s first mass evangelization in post-war Germany in the Olympic Arena of Berlin in 1954 and the other from a home service of a small, but aspiring American-based Pentecostal Church, in its German branch in Hamburg in 2009. Both involve short-consecutive interpretation.

As the use of persuasive rhetorics at this stage is vital, the interpreter’s intervention during these "highly charged" moments would suggest a number of disadvantages: delays, interruptions, extra waiting time, etc. However, my data indicates that indeed the opposite is the case. Taking an interactionist approach, I will first highlight some salient discursive features of the altar call in support of its conceptualization as a ritual, and will then show how the interpreter’s interventions facilitate the unfolding rhetorics and ritualized compulsiveness of the original.

Keywords: interpreting in religious contexts, evangelicals, language ideology.