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The challenges posed to community/public-service interpreting by the introduction of plurilingual mediation in the new companion volume to the common european framework of reference for languages / Los desafíos que plantea la interpretación comunitaria/servicio público por la introducción de la 'mediación plurilingüe' en el nuevo volumen complementario del marco común europeo de referencia para las lenguas

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Abstract: The new Companion Volume to the Common European Framework of reference for Languages has significantly amplified the importance of *mediation* as a plurilingual language activity within its conceptualisation of communicative competence. This is to be warmly welcomed as a positive contribution to the acceptance of increasingly superdiverse plurilingual societies and the potential for multilingual language users/learners to aid communication in complex inter-lingual/cultural settings. However, this article wishes to raise a few important issues that need to be addressed in the new Companion Volume as, it is argued here, they have the potential of having a negative impact on the field of Community/Public-Service interpreting¹.

Key words: Community/Public-Service interpreting, monolingualism, plurilingualism, C.E.F.R Companion Volume.

¹ We interchange between community and public-service interpreting where the literature preferences one or the other but view both as being, principally, equivalent.

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Resumen: El nuevo Volumen Complementario (CV) del Marco Común Europeo de referencia para las Lenguas (CEFR) ha ampliado significativamente la importancia de la mediación como una actividad lingüística plurilingüe dentro de su conceptualización de la competencia comunicativa. Esto debe ser acogido como una contribución positiva y un reconocimiento de sociedades plurilingües cada vez más superdiversas y el potencial de los usuarios/aprendices de idiomas multilingües para actuar como “agentes sociales” en entornos interlingüísticos/culturales complejos. Sin embargo, este artículo desea plantear algunas cuestiones importantes que deben abordarse en el nuevo CV ya que, como se argumenta aquí, tienen el potencial de tener un impacto negativo en el campo de la interpretación comunitaria/servicio público.

Palabras clave: Interpretación comunitaria/servicios públicos, monolingüismo, plurilingüismo, Volumen complementario del MCER

1. Introduction

The 2020 Companion Volume (CV) of the Council of Europe’s CEFR, an updated elaboration on the 2001 publication, has recently advocated plurilingual mediation:

for situations in which the user/learner as a plurilingual individual mediates across language and cultures to the best of their ability in an informal situation in the public, private, occupational or educational domain (CEFR Companion volume with new descriptors, 2020, p.115)

Whilst this is a felicitous move to address increasing plurilingualism in the postmodern world, it does raise two important issues regarding the role of professional interpreting and the epistemology of the plurilingual phenomenon in general, which I address in this article.

The CV states that its conceptualisation of ‘informal mediation’ is unrelated to any form of ‘professional interpreting’, yet Community/Public-service interpreting operates precisely in the areas it identifies, specifically, the ‘occupational or educational domain’. This can be seen as potentially undermining the professional role of Community/Public-service interpreting.

Moreover, in the CV, plurilingual practices in mediatory contexts are framed as observable shifts between the learner’s/user’s Language-A (LA) and their Language-B (LB) (see descriptor scale for ‘acting as an intermediary in informal situations’, p.115). By drawing from the ‘A-B-C’ system of the ‘International Association of Conference Interpreters’ (AIIC²), it could be suggested that the CV is making a monolingual assumption about languages, where each is an individual set of semiotic resources, and that plurilingualism is a form of clear crossing between one set of resources and another (i.e. one ‘language’ to another). This approach, however, would seem to put the CV at odds with the concept of plurilingualism as a form of ‘translanguaging’ (García & Li Wei, 2014), which it claims to adopt. The proponents of translanguaging adopt the epistemological view of languages as part of ‘heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin, 1981), as multiple emergent voices existing contemporaneously in all language and language discourses. Indeed, from a translanguaging perspective, ‘languages’ in plurilingual spaces are not seen as individual and discrete worlds which the individual draws on by *crossing borders* (i.e. LA to LB and vice versa) but immediately available as integrated, multiple

² <https://aiic.org/site/world/about/profession/abc>

resources which can be drawn upon in ‘creative and transformative’ ways in all contingent discourse (García and Otheguy 2019; García & Li Wei, 2018; Li Wei, 2014).

If, as it would seem at face value, the CV’s approach to plurilingualism is an ‘artificial separation’ of languages (i.e. LA/LB) it would also seem to adopt a similar approach to sociocultural and pragmatic competences of plurilingual mediators, which it also claims to be able to evaluate. The CV’s evaluation grid proposes that users/learners can ‘clearly’ identify and explain culture specific elements of *the other* to their interlocutors. The CV’s evaluative framework implies that cultures are distinct entities, where users are crossing borders, like forays into other observable and distinct worlds, without considering potential hybridity, together with multiple, shifting and adaptable situated behaviours. This leads to the conundrum of how to evaluate and grade potentially very complex individual performances, based on subjective personal histories, in mediatory contexts.

In the following sections of this article, we firstly consider the historical development of professional interpreting with regard to its principal two fields, ‘Conference’ and ‘Community/Public-service’ interpreting, with a specific consideration of the latter in relationship to what the CV claims is an unrelated form of ‘informal mediation’. In particular, we examine how potentially erroneous binary approaches are evidenced here, i.e. what constitutes professional and informal interpreting and what divides interpreting from mediating, divisions which are not so clear cut and evident as the CV appears to suggest.

Turning specifically towards the epistemological framing of plurilingualism in the new CV, we consider how this is in tension with translanguaging practices in post-modern, superdiverse communities, and how this might negatively impact Community/Public-service interpreting pedagogy.

2. Community/Public-service interpreting: Professional or ‘informal’ and *ad hoc*?

Although there are multiple forms of professional interpreting, it can be broadly divided into two major fields, conference interpreting and community/public-service interpreting. In very broad strokes, the former consists principally of remote simultaneous interpreting³ of monological speech, principally in the context of formal conference/congress events, whereas the latter is characterised by a presential and dialogical interaction between the interpreter and two or more parties, often with interlocutors with very diverse sociolinguistic and sociocultural backgrounds (see Angelelli, 2006). In this sense community/public-service interpreting corresponds more closely to the form of interaction described by the CV.

Historically, forms of intercommunal interpreting have existed in one *ad hoc* form or another for centuries, wherever minority language speaking communities and majority ones needed to communicate (Gentile *et al*, 1996). Its recognition as a specific term and professional activity (*sic* ‘community interpreting’) however began in the 1970s in Australia, in relation to the rights of the aboriginal population (Chesher, 1997), from whence it gained relatively common usage on the international stage (Pöchhacker, 1999), although many other alternative terms with similar objectives have been adopted by different countries since then. This maybe in part due to different socio-political perspectives among nation states, based on individual socio-cultural, socio-historical, ethnic and inter-linguistic complexities.

The term “Public Service Interpreting” was introduced in the UK in 1994 with the creation of the ‘Diploma in Public Service Interpreting’ (DPSI) by the Chartered Institute of Linguists,

³ Usually performed in soundproof booths with headsets and microphones.

in conjunction with the Nuffield Foundation, revising the syllabus in the 'Certificate in Community Interpreting' (CCI) "to reflect more closely the changing needs of people using or working with 2 or more languages in the public services" (Hammond, 2007, p.1)

Furthermore, community/public service interpreting differentiates itself from conference interpreting by an on-going debate as to what extent the interpreter's professional role can also involve forms of 'cultural mediation' and advocacy during the interpreting event. This feeds into a continuing preference in the established (conference) interpreting profession generally that interpreters should principally act as invisible conduits of language codes and not as visible advocates for their clients. Indeed, there continues to exist a "very blurry line between advocacy and interpreting" (D'Hayer, 2012, p.238).

The debate about whether professional interpreters should act as language conduits, passively interpreting 'verbatim' between interlocutors, or as active, agentive linguistic and cultural mediators, has arisen due to the often different roles played by conference and community interpreters. Over 20 years ago, Wadensjö (1998) argued, taking a Bakhtinian approach (1981), how all community interpreting is by necessity 'dialogical' in nature, where all meaning is inevitably co-constructed. Through this lens, all meaning is linguistically and culturally mediated in its situated context and cannot be reduced to a simple lexicogrammatical interchange between different language codes, where interpreting is aligned with the concept of a 'conduit' (Reddy, 1979), a position in the literature that has been consistently challenged as an attempt to simplistically frame and depersonalise the complex inter-linguistic/cultural role of community interpreters as no more than invisible "mechanical mouthpiece(s)" (Colley & Guéry, 2015, p.120), or "language converter(s)" (Gentile, et al, 1996, p. 38).

The framing of the community interpreter as being an 'intercultural agent' has, and continues to be, advocated for then (Barsky, 1994), where interpreters are seen as playing engaged and agentive roles. Indeed, despite *official guidelines* to interpret verbatim by public sector providers, interpreters are often observed as intervening or even assuming the role of interviewer, at times altering the style and the register of the interviewees' utterances, as active and engaged agents to resolve communicative problems (Pöllabauer, 2004).

Given the diverse positions of focus and role for the interpreter and/or cultural mediator internationally, one must pose the question, 'where does the CEFR position itself in this regard?'. The degree of linguistic and cultural complexities within any contemporary national and/or regional communities are potentially multi-varied. Historic migration patterns, and socio-cultural and socio-linguistic developments in individual nations can impact 'plurilingual mediation' in very complex and varied ways in which the CEFR's framing of it could be criticised as not taking sufficient account of the linguacultural diversities in contemporary settings. At the very least, it might be accused of being 'euro-centric' in its approach, where European languages and cultures are the main focus of its evaluation of the 'plurilingual space' in which the mediator engages. For example, a mediator in an Australian context (with a potentially elevated number of Asian immigrants) might be a very different experience from one in Canada or Italy, with a correspondingly complex linguistic and cultural divide. In this context too, the CV does not appear to take into consideration the potential for very varied person-to-person interaction based on individuals' backgrounds, where they may have very different social and cultural experiences.

One of the CV's assumptions is that the separation between 'professional interpreting' and 'informal mediation' is the presence of mediation and advocacy in the latter and its absence in the former. However, the debate as to how much a professional community/

public-service interpreter is also a mediator and/or advocate is still very much alive, and how these interpreters perform a role that is arguably quite distinct from other forms of interpreting, such as conference interpreting. Moreover, the CV's emphasis on 'mediation' as being used in 'informal' contexts (and consequently, it would seem, non 'professional') aligns with the still pervasive positioning in many countries, globally, of community/public-service interpreting as being an *ad hoc* (informal) service (D'Hayer, 2012). This in turn is related to tensions between what a professional interpreter can or cannot do, specifically in relation to the role of mediation and/or advocacy between parties.

3. How the CV's approach to 'informal mediation' relates to the present state of training, accreditation, and professional role in Community/Public-Service interpreting

Although there have been moves in some countries to elevate and formalise the professional status of community/public-service interpreters (with nationally recognised training programmes and accreditation), notably in Canada, America, Australia and some European countries, such as Austria and the UK (D'Hayer, 2012; Mikkelsen, 2014; Ozolins, 2014; Sasso & Malli, 2014), these are by no way standardised across the board and vary in terms of higher education and professional training institutional approaches (de Pedro Ricoy, 2010). Indeed, returning to the situation in E.U.:

In (...) Spain, Italy and France, PSIT⁴ is only just beginning to take the first steps towards professional status. And in still others (Portugal), PSIT is not even acknowledged. (Valero-Garcés, 2019, p.90)

In the UK, where professional status is advancing more quickly, there exists a National Register for Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) but membership is contingent on acquiring the 'Diploma in Public Service Interpreting' (DPSI⁵) or an equivalent level interpreting qualification at honours degree level (see NRPSI entrance criteria⁶). This entrance requirement however is also dependent on 400 hours of PSI work in the UK which means that a significant number of 'interim members' are practising PSI interpreters with potentially no formal training, and working in a field which, to date, has no monitoring mechanisms in place (de Pedro Ricoy, 2010).

There are over 30 UK courses in Public-Service Interpreting (PSI) outside of higher education (D'Hayer, 2012), varying greatly in subject matter (including those advocated by the CV, i.e. in educational settings and business transactions), as well as duration and methodology (D'Hayer, 2012) but principally skills-based, assessment-led (with a summative approach), and lacking in pedagogic principals and/or quality control (D'Hayer, 2012, p. 238). Hale (2007) also raises serious issues with regard to training in PSI, highlighting the absence of a compulsory pre-service training requirement for practising interpreters, and a shortage of evaluation processes regarding the quality and effectiveness of the training (Hale, 2007). Moreover, in addition to all these issues is a lack of training courses to cater for more minority language pairs and the added complications of inter-cultural understandings between students from diverse socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and their tutors (Orlando, 2017).

⁴ An acronym for 'Public Service Interpreting and Translation'.

⁵ A diploma which is based on The National Centre for languages (CiLT) in concordance with the National Occupational Standards in Interpreting. See: <https://dpsionline.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/National-Occupational-Standards-Interpreting-CILT-2006.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.nrpsi.org.uk/pdf/CriteriaforEntry.pdf>

Although courses in PSI exist in higher education institutions in the E.U. (notably, still a relatively limited number, though growing [Valero-Garces, 2019]), as well as professional training institutions in most of its member states, differences in methodology, aims and objectives are salient within each sector and across the board (D'Hayer, 2012). Moreover, debate is on-going as to whether training in PSI should be the remit of higher education, professional training institutions, NGO's⁷ and/or other entities (De Pedro Ricoy, 2010).

Taking all of this into consideration, the overall picture is one of a slow 'push and pull' momentum towards PSI professionalisation, with considerable gaps in national and international recognition, training and accreditation, as well as a considerable body of unregulated and untrained PSI interpreters in circulation globally. In this context the CEFR's recent promotion of 'informal' mediation, whilst welcomed on one level (promoting plurilingual and pluricultural approaches to language exchanges) can be seen as encroaching upon and potentially negatively impacting a field of interpreting that is already precariously positioned as a developing and socially significant 'profession'. The CEFR promotes *ad hoc* interpreting in areas that are already associated with PSI (i.e. education, academic and/or other forms of conference interpreting, and business exchanges) which impacts a 'profession' which is already under attack by a presumption, in some countries, that it does not necessarily require regulation or specific training, and can be performed by untrained (quasi)bilinguals with little to no external monitoring of their performances and/or evaluation processes in place.

4. Translanguaging practices and Community/Public-Service interpreting

The effects of mass migration and globalisation in the post-modern world has meant that the social, cultural and linguistic diversity in societies globally has become far more complex (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), leading to a phenomenon known as 'Superdiversity' (Vertovec, 2007):

distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants. (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024)

This socio-cultural and multilingual complexity in superdiverse societies, has in turn given rise to a practice known as 'translanguaging'. The term represents a melded often creative interchange between varied linguistic and multimodal repertoires in a multilingual, hybrid form of discourse, "shifting, and variable according to who is using them with whom, at what point, and to what effect" (Pennycook & Otsuji 2015, p.13).

Emerging from bilingual approaches to pedagogy in the 1990s (Williams, 1994), promoting bilingualism in classroom activities, translanguaging has established itself as a comprehensive socio-cultural and sociolinguistic account of an observable practice in daily urban life, one that includes bilingualism but also accounts for far more complex multilinguistic and sociolinguistic interactions. Here, individuals blend and meld all their available (para)linguistic and multimodal resources, acquired through their personal histories and experiences, to facilitate communication in multiple contexts, from education to the areas of commerce in urban settings (i.e. marketplaces, shops, work places, etc).

⁷ Very prominent in Italy.

Translanguaging has been contextualised as a form of ‘multilingualism from below’ (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015)⁸, an integrated part of everyday life: part of processes such as acquiring knowledge; building personal and public relationships; enhancing conviviality; and carrying out business transactions (see Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2016; Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Blommaert 2015; Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). Moreover, research by the ‘TLANG’ project⁹ has shown how translanguaging practices are already well established in diverse private and public contexts in the UK: arts and heritage organisations; community and advocacy groups; educational institutions, and in political representation. In some of the TLANG’s case studies plurilingual mediation has been evidenced as playing an important factor in communicating information and resolving problems.

The prominence of translanguaging can also be seen in recent developments in research on ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ (ELF) which has turned its lens to ‘English as a (Multi)Lingua Franca’ (EMF), acknowledging that English is not always necessarily a discrete bounded lingua franca language but potentially part of a variety of resources in multilingual communication where “English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen” (Jenkins, 2015, p.73).

If translanguaging is so pervasive in post-modern societies, as the above research strongly implies, it would appear to pose a potentially significant challenge to professional interpreting (and/or informal mediation), as to date this has followed a monolingual, bridging approach, i.e. Language A to Language B (see Runcieman, 2021). Indeed, the impact of translanguaging on community/public-service interpreting is beginning to emerge, notably in the legal field (Angermeyer 2015; Baynham & Hanušová, 2018; Runcieman, 2022). It is perhaps not surprising that interpreters who work with multiple minority communities are the most effected by translanguaging practices as they deal daily with those individuals trying to *get things done* in a multilingual and multicultural context.

5. Plurilingual and translanguaging approaches in the CEFR and Translation and Interpreting Studies: divergences

The CEFR’s new CV advocates plurilingual forms of ‘informal mediation’ (CEFR Companion Volume, 2020), and equates this with ‘translanguaging’ practices:

Translanguaging is an action undertaken by plurilingual persons, where more than one language can be involved. A host of similar expressions now exist, but *all are encompassed in the term plurilingualism*. (CEFR Companion volume with new descriptors, 2020, p.31, my emphasis.)

However, whereas ‘Translation and Interpreting Studies’ (TIS) is increasingly moving towards an interpretation of translanguaging as being a fluid, hybrid mixing of languages (see Carreres et al. 2018; Cummins and Early 2014; Esteve, 2020; Esteve and González-Davies 2017, Runcieman, 2021), the CEFR appears to still be adopting a more monolingual approach,

⁸ Pennycook & Otsuji prefer the term ‘metrolingualism’ and there are many other terms for an arguably similar concept (i.e. polylinguaging, polylingual languaging, multilinguaging, translingual practice, flexible bilingualism) but we consider all of these to be related to or in some way subsumed by the term ‘translanguaging’ (see Li Wei, 2018).

⁹ The TLANG project was a four-year project (2014-2018), involving a partnership between six UK universities with various stakeholders, both academic and non-academic, as well as those in the community, and was funded as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s (AHRC) ‘Translating Cultures’ theme. <https://tlang.org.uk/>

one that seems to be more in line with a rigid interpretation of ‘code-switching’, i.e. a clearly defined switching by the user/learner from ‘language A’ to ‘language B’, as evidenced by its evaluation scale in the new CV.

Research over the last 30 years has consistently interrogated and challenged perspectives of the interpreter’s or translator’s role as being a *bridge* between two distinct and bounded languages (i.e. ‘Language A to language B’), variously considering their agentive role, and their interactive participation in complex interlinguistic and intercultural processes (see among others, Angelelli, C., 2006; Mikkelsen, H., 2014; Venuti, L., 2008; Simon, S., Cronin, S., Inghilleri, M., 2019; & Snell-Hornby, M., 1988, 1995, 2006). Much of the research to date has been centred on plurilingual approaches in translation. For example, González-Davies’ research (2020) explored how students working with unfamiliar plurilingual texts and sharing their varied linguistic resources (and metacognitive skills) through mediation and consensus, could successfully resolve information-based tasks in a target language (in this case, English). More recently moreover, the focus has begun to shift towards interpreting. Runcieman (2021), has proposed adapting González-Davies’ research into interpreting curricula. Research into plurilingualism and translanguaging practices in the field of conference interpreting has also begun to emerge. For example, O’Connor *et al.* (2019), researched how their ‘14th Inter-American Symposium on Ethnography and Education’ was influenced by crossing the American-Mexico border over the course of its 3-day period, actively encouraging its participants (organisers, keynote speakers and attendees) to explore their translanguaging processes in a translanguaging space, as an essential part of the symposium experience (where an LA-LB-LC boundary was actively discouraged).

Despite these advances in plurilingual approaches in interpreting, by taking a ‘translanguaging’ approach, the CEFR’s current framing of plurilingual mediation appears to impose a restrictive ‘bilingual’ status on the learner/user, in that they can either mediate by alternating between their ‘language A’ or ‘Language B’ (according to the evaluation framework) and apparently no other language. This despite interdisciplinary evidence that shows that identity is socially constructed, and that a person’s sense of self can *only* emerge from communicative interaction with others in specific contexts (Vygostky 1978; Kiraly 2000; Riley 2007, among others). Moreover, Jørgensen (2008) maintains that language users create, construct and negotiate their identities from a range of resources of which language(s) are an essential part. In a position of language choice, negotiation of which language to use involves negotiation in every interaction. Thus, multilingual speakers “decide who they want to be and change their language practices accordingly” (García, 2010, p.524).

6. Reflections

This article, whilst welcoming the new CV’s approach to mediation in plurilingual contexts, has raised certain issues which the author believes need to be addressed, specifically in relation to community/public-service interpreting. One point is the need for clarity with regard to how the ‘informal mediation’ the CV proposes is contextualised with regard to this field of interpreting, so that it does not undermine an important, still emergent form of interpreting. In this respect, it is argued that the CV needs to engage with the discussion about how much ‘(cultural) mediation’ is or is not part of professional interpreting and where exactly it diverges from professional interpreting in its conceptualisation.

Other issues are concerned with its epistemological position with regard to plurilingualism and the concept of translanguaging. Specifically, how its evaluative framework addresses the complex intermeshing of multiple unbounded languages as well as the possibility of

communicatively functional hybrid and 'creative' forms of repertoire in situated talk. There is a need for greater clarity in how the new CV evaluates sociocultural/pragmatic competences, where superdiverse communities are potentially drawing on complex and multiple resources and creating meaning 'on the move', so to speak.

In all these aspects there appears to be a certain rigidity and mono-lingual/cultural approach which does not reflect the complexities of post-modern, superdiverse societies. The CV's apparent position that languages and cultures can be observed and evaluated in monolithic, LA-LB terms, does not appreciate the multiple contributions of diverse, creative and hybrid contributions across a potentially much broader array of melded resources, from partial or more comprehensive linguistic and culturally sensitive repertoires, that can be activated in situated contexts to address communicative issues.

In an attempt to initiate a conversation about how the new CV might approach a more complicated scenario to a LA-LB divide, and a consequently more fluid and translanguaging approach to interpreting and/or mediating generally, we can turn to recent research. For example, Runcieman's (2021) proposal to introduce a 'translanguaging space' in interpreting studies' curriculum where trainee interpreters/mediators draw on more *multiple* plurilingual competencies based on their specific demographics, as well as their (super) diverse social and cultural worlds. Also, proposing situations where more complex socio-cultural and socio-economic dimensions might heavily impact the form that mediation takes.

In sum, whilst the CEFR's Companion Volume has been partially responsible for initiating an increasing drive to explore plurilingualism in TIS, particularly with regard to 'translanguaging' practices, TIS appears to be taking a different path by challenging monolingual approaches much more than the new CV, at least in the way that the latter frames this in its proficiency scales and level descriptors. Moreover, the CEFR attempts to divide what it terms 'mediation' from 'professional interpreting', by considering the former to be 'informal' aid provided by the user/learner in plurilingual spaces. This, however, is argued to be a moot point, in part for some of the arguments given regarding the blurred lines between the different forms of 'professional' interpreting already outlined (i.e. community/public-service interpreting). Moreover, it is also noted that some of the contexts and skills required for this new CV form of mediation are indeed quite similar to community/public-service interpreting (liaison/dialogue interpreting in Higher Education), i.e. 'consecutive interpreting'¹⁰ in particular, as taught in most BA degrees (such as the interpreter's requirement to summarise content, engage in note-taking, and explaining data, etc.).

In conclusion, this article argues that the new CV can be improved by addressing some or all the points raised in this article and become a much more forceful approach to how plurilingual 'mediation' can serve an increasingly superdiverse world and yet still aid in increasing and establishing the professional role of the Community/Public-Service interpreter.

¹⁰ This is a form of interpreting where the speaker (interlocutor) pauses regularly in order to allow the interpreter to interpret what has been conveyed linguistically.

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