



Interpreting World Heritage

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Transinterpret – Enhancing Professionalism in Heritage Interpretation by Transnational Quality Management in Europe

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Abstract

Transinterpret is a project designed to provide practical recommendations for heritage interpretation. It serves also as a discussion forum and a framework to exchange ideas and experiences with partners. Representatives and institutions of several rural regions throughout Europe are co-operating to bring their natural and historical sites alive. The main objective is to develop international standards and to establish a quality management for heritage interpretation in Europe, in order to assist local initiatives with the planning and implementation of interpretive projects. Ultimately the cooperation aims to promote ecologically, economically and socially sustainable heritage tourism that generates appreciation of the natural and cultural environment. The transnational quality management by Transinterpret shall further be institutionalized by the European Network for heritage interpretation.

Keywords

heritage interpretation, quality management, quality standards, Transinterpret, Interpret Europe, heritage tourism, rural areas, Europe, sustainable development, market for interpretation, professional interpretation

Introduction: Latent demand for professional interpretation in Europe

Apart from Britain the concept of heritage interpretation is not yet well established in most European countries. There are several communication experts in this field, who provide and apply interpretive principles and know-how. Some of them are involved in international events and don't bother reading international literature about interpretation; others gained some equivalent knowledge from examination of good and poor practices, from learning by doing, or from combining different approaches—e.g. in museology, in environmental education and communication sciences. However, many people—if not the great majority—dealing professionally with heritage in Europe never came across the notion 'heritage interpretation' in the sense of the technical term. A conceptual communication framework, generally accepted as a professional reference point and quality standard among those dealing with natural and cultural heritage, is still lacking. On the contrary, the opinion is still quite common that it is the scientists and technical experts in the respective research fields who are most capable of communicating the significance of a given heritage resource to the general public.

Therefore it is no surprise that heritage is sometimes very poorly communicated in museums, visitor centers, self-guided trails and guided tours and basic interpretive principles are quite often violated even on the most famous sites.



Fig. 1: A visitor willing to bend down in order to decipher the label of a sculpture which is of high significance to the European culture at one of the most famous sites on the continent. Would he also be prepared to do the same at less famous places? (Photo: Lehnes 2004)

On the other hand during the last decade many rural regions in Europe tried to capitalize on their natural and cultural heritage by presenting it to visitors. They expected to attract more tourists thus generating new sources of income for local inhabitants that are

suffering because of a decline in farming and losses of industrial jobs. Most of those trail and museum projects gain funds from national or European agencies. This support is granted to foster economic development of structurally weak regions or to raise appreciation of the natural environment. However, neither regional development agencies or village administrations, nor local enthusiasts who are often taking the initiative for such heritage projects have access to the concept of interpretation. They are unaware of the multifaceted factors of success that need to be addressed in order to engage visitors' enthusiasm. Even if there was a professional interpreter available, the responsible project managers are not likely to spend money for adequate interpretive advice as long as they are not convinced that this extra investment pays off.

Avoiding reinventing the wheel again and again

Establishing heritage interpretation as a professional standard could be the solution to the above mentioned problem in continental Europe. Among others (e.g. Ludwig 2003) Transinterpret is one project that aims to introduce the interpretive approach into heritage management and tourism development.

The initiative to this transnational cooperation project was taken by the Southern Black Forest LEADER¹ Action Group (a regional development board within the framework of the European Community initiative LEADER) and the Department of Physical Geography at the University of Freiburg, Germany. During preceding pilot projects in the late 1990s the know-how of heritage interpretation had been applied to the Black Forest for the first time (Lehnes & Glawion 2002). Due to differences between visitors in North America and Germany some recommendations from American technical literature had to be adapted to the conditions of a German hiking destination. The positive feedback by visitors and by locals has encouraged the LEADER Action Group to pursue the establishment of heritage interpretation as a means of more successfully communicating about the region's heritage.

However, despite these positive experiences of the pilot project (Lehnes 2004), heritage related projects in other villages within the same region were still suffering from a lot of shortcomings. Most of these rural trail and museum projects are run by volunteers; therefore each project team should have gotten acquainted with the know-how of communicating heritage to an audience enjoying their leisure time. They rarely did; instead they started to reinvent the wheel from scratch – and to make the same mistakes that had caused shortcomings in many other projects.

Therefore the question arose of how to make the know-how and experiences gained available to those new heritage presentation projects in the region. The solution: Build up a collection of practical recommendations and standards for factors of success for interpretive projects and make them easily available to new local initiatives. Thus the

¹ LEADER+ is one of four initiatives financed by EU structural funds and is designed to help rural actors consider the long-term potential of their local region (c.f. http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/index_en.htm).

core idea of the Transinterpret approach to quality enhancement in heritage presentation was born.

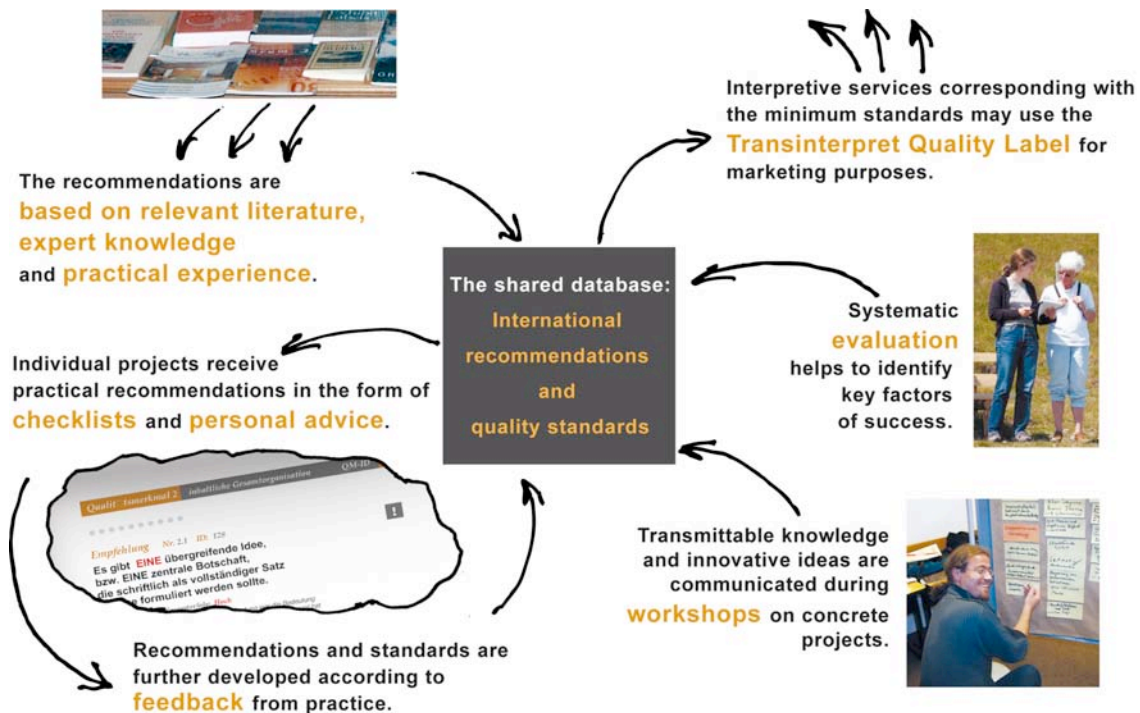


Fig. 2: The Transinterpret approach to quality management.

The recommendations and standards are mainly derived from two sources: technical literature on interpretation and from accompanying evaluation research. Several rural LEADER regions are cooperating to build up this system.

Projects in the partner regions are advised to use the Transinterpret checklists for their work. The checklists are created individually for each local interpretation project that uses the Transinterpret service. A database selection allows focusing the checklists only on those recommendations that are relevant for the respective type of project, e.g. a guided tour, a self-guided trail using booklets, or addressing special target groups. Using a database-driven quality management also allows incorporating new findings easily to the existing collection of recommendations and standards. In practice this proved to be very useful, because the feedback from local projects and the discussions during workshops frequently revealed the need to further differentiate the recommendations. Thus new findings are very quickly available to all new projects at partner areas asking for an up-to-date checklist.

The evaluation is considered highly important by Transinterpret, because of the diversity of audiences in different European countries. A Swiss museum director observed visitors from Germany reading quite long texts at an exhibition while visitors from France were switching their attention to something else considerably earlier. Some recommendations

still have to prove their validity for e.g. domestic visitors within Greece. Evaluation uses a mix of methods, including random testing using the Transinterpret evaluation checklists, expert interviews and visitor questionnaires and observations.

Beneficiaries of the Transinterpret Services and the Need for a Quality Label

There are several groups benefiting from the Transinterpret services and from a more professional heritage interpretation in general. Within the Transinterpret framework, immediate beneficiaries are distinguished from the actual target groups to whom interpretation is tailored, as well as from the ultimate beneficiaries.

1. Immediate beneficiaries, i.e. executing organizations and staff tasked with developing new interpretive provisions, benefit by:
 - _ receiving personal advice concerning project planning and implementation by Transinterpret experts;
 - _ actively using the planning and evaluation checklists to ensure their work meets current international recommendations and standards;
 - _ sharing their experiences with others through active participation in developing the recommendations, whilst benefiting from others doing the same;
 - _ receiving international attention through Transinterpret and using their participation in Transinterpret in marketing;
 - _ obtaining practical training through participation in the workshops.

2. The actual target group, i.e. holiday makers, day visitors or the local recreational public, benefit through greater satisfaction with interpretive provisions. Visitors are better able to identify with the natural and cultural heritage, the place and the region.

3. For the ultimate beneficiaries, i.e. the tourism sector, communes and regions, regional marketing organizations and institutions tasked with protecting the cultural and natural heritage, the qualitative improvements facilitated by Transinterpret lead to better and more effective implementation of their respective economic, social and ideational objectives.

Interpretive services within the project partners' regions meeting the Transinterpret quality standards and recommendations are rewarded by a quality label. It is not compulsory to follow every recommendation and standard blindly. There may always be good reasons for individual cases to deviate from a particular recommendation. However, the arguments for such a deviation should be reported to the Transinterpret team. If the argumentation is valid, the original recommendation does not affect the assessment of the interpretive service negatively and the quality label will be awarded. Especially these valid arguments are fed back to the Transinterpret network in order to constantly up-date and amend the recommendations.

The Transinterpret quality label is of different value for the different groups of beneficiaries. For the immediate beneficiaries, people and organizations carrying out an

interpretation project, an international label may be considered a reward for the significant extra effort that up-to-date interpretation requires, compared to poorer presentations that many others offer. Experience during accompanying local projects revealed that such project teams often are heterogeneous concerning the readiness to invest more time, money and efforts in order to achieve a better result. Often some members of the team have some pre-knowledge or a “feeling” concerning communication requirements. This is frequently questioned by other team members rather because they want to avoid extra workload than on a sound knowledge or experience. International quality standards and the requirements to receive the quality label give a strong and reliable orientation to internal discussions or even help to avoid such fruitless discussions at all.

For the potential visitor the quality label can become even more important. It helps to distinguish interpretive services, which consequently follow a visitor centered planning approach, from the multitude of mediocre or even poor heritage presentations. Interim research results of implemented self-guided trails with the Transinterpret label revealed that the label is likely to have an impact: one third of the visitors answered they were ready to consider the label when deciding on which sites to visit next. This number should increase even more, when the label has become better known. Up to now, no special marketing measures have been started, because the project is still in its research and development phase.

Obviously a successful quality label that influences visitors’ decisions on which destination to choose will be of great value for strengthening the competitiveness of sustainable heritage tourism. Moreover, institutions providing grants for interpretation projects usually expect positive effects on the third group, the ultimate beneficiaries and the aims these groups are pursuing, respectively. The latter comprise regional economic development or conservation of the natural and cultural heritage. The Transinterpret quality label ensures more successful use of the funds that are granted by these governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Transnational co-operation

Developing competing quality management systems and labels in the field of heritage interpretation in different European regions does not make much sense. In order to create a system that is capable of adapting to the European variety of languages, cultures and mentalities, international partners were sought out from the very beginning to set up the standards and recommendations project. The project title “Transinterpret” is referring to this *transnational* approach on *transfer* of know-how and experiences in *interpretation*.

The current development phase is carried out by three German LEADER regions, one Italian LEADER Group and one partner from outside the European Union building up Transinterpret Switzerland. Nine LEADER regions from Greece applied to join the co-operation in March 2005 and were still waiting for the approval by their national administration in January 2007. This example illustrates some of the difficulties which arise when coping with different political and administrative systems from within and

outside the European Union. In such a heterogeneous administrative environment it is necessary to find flexible solutions in project organization.

The organizational structure of Transinterpret is set up in a way that allows close relationships to local projects despite the international co-operation, growth, and flexibility by networking on local, regional and international levels. Thus problems in one region do not disrupt work in other regions.

– Local project teams and Regional Advisory Center:

Transinterpret Regional Advisory Centers provide personal advice based on the current planning checklists for specific project types.

Local project teams report back to their Advisory Center with recommendations, and standards are met as well as needs for additional recommendations or amendments for existing ones respectively. Such feedback is used for optimizing the recommendations database.

– The international Center of Resources:

In order to enable quick access to the rapidly growing increase in knowledge and experience in professional interpretation, know-how needs to be collated and continuously updated in the central database. To keep up the consistency of recommendations and standards, this database is maintained by the international project management. Direct access to the database by internet will be made available for the Regional Advisory Centers and the local project teams in 2007.

The international Center of Resources at Freiburg University is also responsible for the joint website, the international workshops in different partner regions and the analysis of regional data collected for evaluation.

Any local Transinterpret project or Regional Advisory Center can suggest new recommendations. However, it is the international Center of Resources' task to systematically develop proposals for new recommendations e.g. concerning specific target groups with special needs. If no objections are voiced, new recommendations are added to the central database and translated into the local languages by the respective Regional Advisory Centers. A technical advisory group comprising of external experts then assesses the recommendations and puts forward which recommendations should be considered international standards.

Conclusion

Concerning the development of interpretation as a profession in continental Europe the situation can be characterized by a strong discrepancy between expected effects of heritage presentation projects in the tourism context and severely underestimated requirements for professional communication skills. In other words, although a big potential market for professional interpretation exists in most parts of Europe, it is difficult to realize this latent demand. Such a business environment bears a threat: when the great majority of heritage projects is poorly planned and implemented, the visitors will be disappointed and consequently the high expectation in heritage tourism will be disappointing as well. Such a scenario would in the longer term lead to a decreasing

appreciation of the natural and cultural heritage itself—especially in a world that is governed more and more by thinking in economic terms.

By initiating an international quality management and a quality label, Transinterpret is contributing to making the benefits of professional interpretation more easily visible. This is especially important in countries where no tradition in heritage interpretation exists and the sophisticated communication know-how is widely unknown. Up-to-now this strategy has already been successful in the three German LEADER areas, where several self-guided trails, rural museums and tour-guide-training projects have been implemented in 2006. As a consequence of the Transinterpret projects the Southern Black Forest Regional Park (Naturpark Südschwarzwald) edited a manual for the planning of self-guided trails which is entirely based on the methods of heritage interpretation (Lehnes 2006).

In 2007 the international partners will finish several local projects, too, and results of the evaluation will be available. This will set the stage to open the network for new partners in 2008.

One of the upcoming tasks of the Transinterpret team is to manage the shift from a project with limited time frame to a permanent non-governmental organization. For this sake Interpret Europe, the European Network for Heritage Interpretation, shall be founded as a formal international association within the next two years. This network shall carry on the Transinterpret services and serve as a non-profit certifying body.

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