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The Community Interpreter: A Question of Role

Abstract

Studies of conference interpreting and community interpreting differ from studies of the translation of written texts in their object of study. Thus, unlike studies of written translations, studies of interpreting have traditionally focused on the individual performing the translation, i.e. *the interpreter*, as opposed to *interpreting*. Moreover, whereas research in conference interpreting has traditionally centred on issues connected with the process of interpreting, research in community interpreting has traditionally centred on role perceptions and expectations among users of interpreting services and interpreting practitioners. This article presents an overview of relevant community interpreting literature and shows how the topic of interpreter role has always dominated the field.

1. Introduction

In their study of translator status in Denmark, Dam/Zethsen (2008) draw attention to the fact that translation studies have traditionally focused on *translation* as opposed to the *translator*. According to Dam/Zethsen (2008: 71), translation studies have only recently seen an increased focus on areas such as “translators’ backgrounds, their motivation, and their relationship with publishers and editors”. Dam/Zethsen (2008: 72) maintain, nevertheless, that the topic of translator status is still a largely ignored object of study, especially outside the field of literary translation. However, if we look at interpreting studies, which is mostly considered a sub-discipline of translation studies, we get a very different picture.

Interpreting studies are generally divided into two separate fields: conference interpreting and community interpreting (e.g. Jacobsen

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2002). In both fields, studies have traditionally focused on the *interpreter* as opposed to *interpreting*. Presumably, one reason for this tradition in interpreting studies is the visibility of the interpreter. Unlike the translator, the interpreter performs immediate translations of source texts, something which requires her presence at the speech event, whether physically in the room with the primary participants, in an interpreting booth (perhaps only “visible” as a voice in the end receiver’s ear), or on a screen (in video-linked interpreting). Bearing in mind this visibility, plus the fact that performing immediate, and oral, translations require additional competences than those needed for written translations, such as a good working memory, interactional skills, and a capacity for dividing one’s attention between various simultaneous operations (e.g. Gile 1995), the traditional focus on the interpreter is not really surprising.

However, studies of conference interpreting and community interpreting differ in their chosen issues. Thus, whereas research in conference interpreting has traditionally focused on cognitive, neurophysiological and neurolinguistic issues (e.g. Kurz 1994) as well as ‘performance phenomena’, i.e. issues such as interpreters’ memory span, the time-lag (ear-voice span) between input and output, chunking and anticipation (e.g. Mason 2000), research in community interpreting has traditionally focused on role perceptions and expectations among users of interpreting services and interpreting practitioners (e.g. Shlesinger/Pöchhacker 2008). One obvious reason for this difference is the different characteristics of conference and community interpreting which is illustrated in table 1 (cf. Jacobsen 2002: 6):

| Community interpreting | Conference interpreting |
|--|---|
| Dialogue (typically, but not always, two primary speakers) | Monologue |
| Spontaneous speech (some speech may be pre-planned) | Pre-planned speech (often scripted source material) |
| (Relatively) short turns | Sustained turns |
| Bi-directional interpreting | Uni-directional interpreting |

Table 1. The essential characteristics of community interpreting and conference interpreting

Clearly, these different characteristics invite different kinds of research. Thus, whereas community interpreting invites research of interaction (face-to-face, three-party), conference interpreting invites research of action (on the part of the interpreter) (cf. Mason 2000: 216).

Finally, the bulk of research in community interpreting has been conducted in legal and medical settings (e.g. Hale 2007), and apart from role, issues include professionalism, in-group loyalties, discourse, cross-cultural mediation and the power dynamics of the interpreting situation (e.g. Jacobsen 2002). Before exploring the topic of role perceptions and expectations further, however, it will be useful to define community interpreting, not least because of considerable terminological confusion in the field.

2. Defining community interpreting

A simple way of defining community interpreting is to distinguish it from conference interpreting, as in table 1 above. Thus, another distinction between the two types of interpreting which deserves mention is Pöchhacker's (2004) distinction of inter-social versus intra-social settings, made by looking exclusively at the social context of interaction. This distinction illustrates the very different settings of conference interpreting events and community interpreting events, and thus further serves to explain the different research focus. Pöchhacker (2004: 13) defines inter-social settings as business settings or diplomatic settings, i.e. settings which involve contacts between social entities. Intra-social settings, on the other hand, involve contacts in multi-ethnic societies and may be courtrooms, police stations, hospitals, dental clinics, classrooms or various social institutions.

However, none of these or other possible distinctions (for example between language modality or between working modes) contribute to clearing up the considerable terminological confusion mentioned before. Though community interpreting now seems to be a widely accepted term, judging by the Critical Link conference series (Toronto 1995, Vancouver 1998, Montreal 2001, Stockholm 2004, Sydney 2007, Birmingham 2010), public-service interpreting is sometimes used (mainly in the UK), as is dialogue interpreting, liaison interpreting, cultural interpreting, escort interpreting or ad hoc interpreting (e.g. Hale 2007). In addition, community/public service/liaison/etc. interpreting is some-

times referred to by its particular setting, i.e. healthcare interpreting (or medical interpreting, or hospital interpreting), legal interpreting (or court interpreting or police interpreting), social interpreting (e.g. Pöschhacker 2004). In fact, court interpreting is sometimes regarded as a distinct field with different role perceptions and expectations, which is presumably due to the formalized setting with its fixed agenda, though the fact that the need for interpreting in legal settings has generally been recognized for a longer time than other types of community interpreting (e.g. Hale 2007; Mikkelsen 2000) may also play a role. However, despite there being diversity between, for example, a court interpreting event and a health interpreting event, there is also similarity. For example, the two events share certain contextual constraints, such as the immediacy of the encounter, the physical presence of all three participants (excluding telephone or video interpreting events) and the often sensitive nature of the topic discussed (a criminal offence, a serious illness, etc.). Thus, irrespective of speech event, the field of study is interpreter-mediated communication in face-to-face interaction. As a rule, therefore, the findings from a study of interpreters working in one setting will be relevant to interpreters working in other settings also.

Consequently, for the purpose of this article, I shall employ the term community interpreting. Moreover, I shall include sign-language interpreting under this heading because it shares all the interactional features of spoken language interpreting in community interpreting event, though the face-to-face relationship is really between producer and receiver of sign instead of between principal participants (cf. Jacobsen 2002). Thus, interpreting events may be police interrogations, courtroom proceedings, immigration hearings, drivers licence tests, classroom interaction, doctor-patient consultations, dietician-client consultations, employment interviews, or social worker-client interviews. The language modality may be spoken-language or sign-language, and the working mode may be simultaneous, consecutive or sight translation. Finally, the interpreter and the primary participants may be present in the same room, or one of the primary participants, or the interpreter, may be speaking via a telephone or a video-link.

To sum up, therefore, a community interpreter typically works in an institutionalised setting. The speech event is essentially triadic, involving her and only two primary participants. Moreover, one primary participant is typically a professional – a police officer, a lawyer, a doctor,

a psychologist, a professor, a social worker, etc. – with a certain amount of power, while the other primary participant is typically a non-professional (and a member of a linguistic minority), who has only a small amount of power (e.g. Englund-Dimitrova 1997; Jacobsen 2008; Roy 2000). Naturally, these and other contextual constraints, such as those mentioned earlier, are bound to exert considerable influence on the way meanings are exchanged and negotiated (e.g. Jacobsen 2002).

Consequently, bearing in mind the complexity of the community interpreting event, including the contextual constraints, and especially the fact that the event essentially involves three participants, one of whom is the interpreter, it is understandable that, as referred to above, studies have concentrated on role perceptions and expectations, since this topic is “inextricably linked” (Shlesinger/Pöchhacker 2008) to deliberations of interpreters’ visibility and degree of active participation in the event. The topic has also traditionally been the subject of a great deal of controversy, however, especially in legal settings, and not only between users of interpreting services, on the one hand, and interpreting practitioners on the other, but also among interpreting practitioners themselves (e.g. Angelelli 2004; Hale 2004). Section 3 explores this controversy further.

3. Role perceptions and expectations

Role perceptions and expectations have in fact been the focus of attention since the first studies of community interpreting, which centred on the behaviour of non-trained interpreters working in a courtroom in Papua New Guinea, were published by Rainer Lang (1976, 1978). Thus, though Lang in his earlier paper (1976) focuses on the status of the local interpreting service, concluding that there is a need for formal training of interpreters, he also discusses (1976: 336) methodological aspects of interpreting and explains that, in his view, the role of the interpreters “was contaminated” from the beginning by their roles of “intermediaries” (resulting from the fact that they were bilinguals). Moreover, in his second paper, which centres on the behavioural aspects of one particular interpreter, Lang (1978: 241) concludes that, although the “official role was that of a passive participant”, the interpreter in fact participated actively. Lang (1978: 241) further concludes that the interpreter’s involvement in the interaction was subject to negotiation, and that prima-

ry participants used linguistic cues and paralinguistic features to signal to what extent they wished to include or exclude him. “Likewise”, Lang (1978: 241) concludes, the interpreter “can by these means actively involve himself, or abstain from such involvement”. Thus, Lang (1976, 1978) reproduces the idealistic image of interpreters who work in legal settings, which is traditionally reflected in official requirements, namely that of a passive and invisible participant, a mere translating machine whose role it is to deliver word-by-word translations of source texts.

However, Lang does not problematize this idealistic image, which is still predominant in legal systems today, and which especially commanded attention in the 1990s (e.g. Berk-Seligson 1990/2002; Fenton 1997; Fowler 1997; Jansen 1995; Mikkelsen 1998; Morris 1989, 1993, 1995; Shlesinger 1991). Four of these studies, which were carried out in courtrooms in the USA (Berk-Seligson 1990/2002), the Netherlands (Jansen 1995) and Israel (Morris 1989; Shlesinger 1991) have particularly served to illustrate the problems connected with the image of the interpreter as a passive translating device, by demonstrating how some interpreters are prepared to exercise latitude and modify originals to convey their perception of speaker meaning or to soften the impact of their target texts on end receivers. The four studies agree that the main reason for this was the interpreters’ objective of effective communication, but they differ as regards the degree of latitude interpreters should be allowed to exercise. For example, while Morris (e.g. 1989: 14) and Shlesinger (e.g. 1991: 153) argue that a degree of latitude is necessary to convey speaker meaning, Berk-Seligson talks of “intrusiveness” and interpreters’ “intrusive behaviour” (e.g. 1990: 214).

In my own study of interpreting in a Danish legal setting which was completed in 2002 (Jacobsen 2002), I take the side of Morris (1989) and Shlesinger (1991). Applying Grice’s (1975) theory of conversational implicature, which provides a framework for analyzing how hearers infer speakers’ intentions, to the investigated data, I found evidence that the interpreters in my study were preoccupied with pragmatics, i.e. with building a mental model of speaker meaning and with conveying this mental model to end receivers, despite an official requirement for verbatim translations. I argue, therefore, that the key element inherent in an interpreter’s performance, i.e. the very fact that her presence is meant to ensure successful interaction, which necessarily entails that the primary participants understand each other as if they spoke the same lan-

guage, inevitably provides her with a more active role than prescribed by official guidelines.

Whereas all of the above studies deliberated role perceptions and expectations focusing on the interpreter's role of translating machine *versus* active participant, Cecilia Wadensjö (e.g. 1992/1998) in her study of the participation framework of community interpreting encounters focused on the interpreter's role as translator *and* coordinator. In fact, Wadensjö's (e.g. 1992/1998) analysis of Goffman's (1981) concept of 'footing', used to characterize the primary participants' and the interpreter's relationship to each other, has provided such major insight into interpreter roles that it constitutes one of the most significant contributions to community interpreting research and therefore deserves special consideration.

Briefly, Goffman (1981: 227) defines 'footing' as the "alignment of an individual to a particular utterance, whether involving a production format, as in the case of a speaker, or solely a participation status, as in the case of a hearer". In other words, participants adopt different, and shifting, roles and attitudes vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis utterances. Goffman (1981: 227) further explains that participants constantly shift footing and that such shifts are "a persistent feature of natural talk". Applying this framework to her study of interpreting in Swedish health-care clinics and police stations, Wadensjö (e.g. 1992, 1998) demonstrates that shifts of footing (reflected in a shift of pronoun and address) are commonplace in these speech events. She further identifies (e.g. 1992: 117-125) the various production and reception roles that participants can adopt and shows how these fundamentally affect what is communicated and how it is communicated. She then proceeds to show (e.g. 1992: 127-134) that, at various stages of the speech event, an interpreter may adopt all of the identified reception roles, not just as a result of a free choice, but as a reaction to the principal participants' assumptions about her appropriate role. Thus, the interpreter plays an important role as a *coordinator* of others' talk by virtue of the footing she adopts, a role, Wadensjö (1998: 145) argues, which is "intimately interdependent" with the role as translator of others' talk.

Legal and medical settings are still the main setting for studies of community interpreting here in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and the topic of interpreter role is still predominant (e.g. Hale

2007). However, studies no longer deliberate *if* community interpreters are visible and active participants, but rather *how much* and *with what consequences* (e.g. Angelelli 2004; Merlini/Favaron 2005; Mikkelsen 2008). Thus, controversies still exist. For example, Leanza (2005), who reports on interpreting in paediatric settings, shows that paediatricians tend to view the interpreter as a neutral “translating machine”, or a neutral ally in consultations (2005: 177). Leanza suggests (2005: 186-187), nevertheless, that interpreters may adopt four different roles vis-à-vis patients: the role of *system agent* (transmitting the dominant norms, values and discourse to the patient, ignoring cultural differences), the role of *community agent* (presenting the minority norms and values as potentially equally valid, thus acknowledging cultural differences), the role of *integration agent* (finding resources to facilitate integration by helping migrants and people from the receiving society understand each other, a role that takes place outside medical consultations), and the role of *linguistic agent* (attempting to maintain impartiality, intervening only on language level). However, the interpreters in Leanza’s (2005: 179-186) study acted mainly as linguistic agents and system agents, and rarely as community agents, preferring to keep “a status quite different from that of their fellow migrant patients”. Leanza (2005: 187) argues that granting interpreters more autonomy and acknowledging them as professionals in their own right would be one way of making them adopt all four roles, and, in turn, facilitate the success of the interaction. Similarly, Hale (2008), who reports on the role of interpreters in legal settings, maintains (2008: 99) that role definition remains “a controversial issue” in the setting. The reason, she argues (2008: 100-101) is the profession’s “different levels of development across the world”, i.e. the lack of a strong, unified profession that could counteract the different role expectations of users of interpreting services. Hale (2008: 101-119) then proceeds to present five interpreter roles that have either been “openly prescribed” or “deduced” from the performance of interpreters: (1) advocate for the minority language speaker, (2) advocate for the institution or service provider, (3) gatekeeper (controlling the flow of information from e.g. lawyer to defendant by introducing, reinforcing and excluding topics), (4) facilitator of communication (feeling responsible for the success of the interaction), and (5) faithful renderer of others’ utterances. In her conclusion, Hale (2008: 119) argues that interpreters need to consider the consequences of their choices before

adopting a role. She further argues (2008: 119) that, bearing in mind the possible consequences demonstrated by her examples, role (5), faithful renderer of others' utterances, is in fact "the only adequate role" for interpreters working in legal settings. This does not mean, however, that "interpreters must act as mindless machines", but they should attempt "to be as accurate as possible within human limitations (2008: 119). Hale (2008: 119) maintains that the higher the level of their skills, and the better the working conditions they have, the better chance interpreters have of translating accurately (2008: 119).

Consequently, Leanza (2005) and Hale (2008) both argue that different role perceptions and expectations of users of interpreting services still complicate interpreting situations irrespective of the setting. They further argue that the problem may be solved by professionalizing interpreters and granting them proper working conditions. Moreover, both authors suggest a number of roles that interpreters may adopt. They differ as regards their recommendations for which roles are suitable in an interpreting event, however. Thus, whereas Leanza (2005) would like interpreters to adopt all of the suggested roles and function not only as interpreters but also as cultural brokers and facilitators of integration, Hale (2008) advocates caution, arguing that interpreters need to consider the consequences before adopting a particular role.

Finally, these and other studies (e.g. Bot 2005; Morris 2008) illustrate the increased focus on quality in interpreting, a topic which is also linked to deliberations of visibility and degree of active participation. In conclusion, therefore, the topic of role perceptions and expectations still dominate the field, and the controversy that Lang first touched upon 32 years ago (Lang 1976) looks set to prevail for many years to come.

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