

Broader, better, further: Developing Interpreting Studies

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The development of Interpreting Studies as a (sub)discipline within Translation Studies is discussed with a focus on its domain of study, its models and methods, and its impact in the scientific community and in society at large. Whereas a broadening of the field in terms of its scope of investigation has been under way for one or two decades, a need for socially sensitive theories and models and for more advanced research methods is identified. Progress in these areas, especially through graduate-level research training, must therefore be made for Interpreting Studies to raise its status as the discipline of choice for the investigation of issues relating to mediated real-time intercultural communication.

Introduction

The title of this contribution to the round table on “The Future of Research on Interpreting” may seem excessively boastful. As will become clear, however, it is intended to be programmatic at best, pointing to areas where further development is much needed if Interpreting Studies is to improve its status as a scientific discipline capable of investigating relevant issues of mediated real-time intercultural communication and securing sufficient impact for its findings. As will be argued below, these critical areas include more sociologically sensitive models and more advanced methods of empirical research, with the latter requiring a push for more research training even at the level of professional interpreter education.

Before moving on to review the state of interpreting studies in terms of its domain, models and methods, I would like to raise for discussion the issue of its curiously ambiguous *status* within, or in relation to, Translation Studies. Whereas interpreting is given due consideration as one of many forms of translation, or translational activity, in reference works (such as the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* or the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies*) and scholarly societies (such as the European Society for Translation Studies, currently headed by a well-known interpreting researcher), it is at times also given separate treatment, as in its own *Routledge Reader* and introductory textbook. Such separate treatment also underlies the programming of the Tarragona Symposium on “The Future of Research on Translation and Interpreting”, where institutional

frameworks, sociological approaches, and the role of new technologies in translation research were discussed in separate round tables before a round table dedicated to interpreting. While this may have been due to practical issues, the principle of separate treatment also informs such influential publications as *The Map* (Williams & Chesterman 2002) and the recent *Routledge Companion to Translation Studies* (Munday 2008), in which chapters on linguistic issues, text production, cognitive activity, intercultural communication, ethics, training and technology precede a chapter on “Issues in Interpreting Studies” (as well as one on audiovisual translation).

My point here is not to argue for one approach or the other, or to criticize the choices made by organizers and editors, but to consider the potential *implications* of a separate versus an integrated approach. Separate treatment clearly gives interpreting scholars more freedom to set their own conceptual and methodological priorities and foreground such distinctive features of interpreting as on-site interaction and time stress in a unique form of cognitive multi-tasking. At the same time, making interpreting a separate concern carries the risk of losing vital areas of inter-subdisciplinary interface (as emphasized, for instance, in Schäffner 2004). In the worst case, it allows for a view of Translation Studies without any reference to interpreting. Examples of the latter include Snell-Hornby’s *Integrated Approach* (1988), or the reading list for the PhD Program in Translation Studies at the University of Ottawa, which runs to several pages without including a single work on interpreting (Luise von Flotow, personal communication, Dec. 2008). It is precisely in the context of current initiatives to reshape doctoral programs within the Bologna system, including mandatory coursework, that this issue acquires vital significance. Without inclusion in the canon of Translation Studies—notwithstanding dedicated publications to account for its specific research tradition and conceptual features, interpreting may receive insufficient attention in postgraduate research and become sidelined as a field of study.

Against this background of (sub)disciplinary relations, I will now consider the development of Interpreting Studies in terms of its domain, models and methods, moving from ongoing trends to future needs and aspirations. I will try in particular to highlight aspects of interpreting research that deserve an integrated treatment under the headings of sociological approaches, new technologies, and institutional frameworks, as dealt with in other Tarragona round tables.

Broader...

If there is one development in Interpreting Studies that could not have escaped general notice in the wider field of Translation Studies, it is the broadening scope of investigation. If in the early 1990s Interpreting Studies could still be perceived as “conference interpreting studies”, with research

interest traditionally focused on cognitive processing issues, by the end of the century the center of attention had gravitated toward community-based interpreting and the sociocultural and institutional contexts associated with it. In efforts to structure the domain of study, the well-established distinction by mode (consecutive vs. simultaneous interpreting) gave way to the characterization of interpreting types by setting and also by language modality (spoken vs. signed). Going far beyond its early twentieth-century origins in international relations, professional interpreting (and non-professional mediation) is now studied in police interrogations, asylum hearings or medical consultations, to name only a few examples. By the same token, conference-like situations are no longer the prototype of interpreter-mediated interaction, as face-to-face dialogue has come (back) into its own as the basic form of interpersonal communication. This two-fold extension of the object of study, from international to intra-social (community-based) contacts and from conference-like to face-to-face interaction, has made it appropriate to view interpreting as a broad conceptual spectrum (cf. Pöchhacker 2004: 17), ranging from, say, simultaneous interpreting in the plenary sessions of the European Parliament to sentence-by-sentence consecutive performed by untrained bilinguals in public service institutions like hospitals or schools. Associated with such examples at opposite ends of the spectrum are distinctive types of languages, discourses, interpreting skills and interactant relations in terms of status, power and educational background. All of this makes for a highly diverse and multi-faceted domain of study (cf. Pöchhacker 2004: 24), founded on the conceptualization of interpreting as a situated social practice.

In addition to the widening scope of investigation, an extension toward broader dimensions has been in evidence also for attempts to fashion descriptive and explanatory models of interpreting as a process and an activity. Whereas most scholarly attention had been devoted to models of the cognitive process of (simultaneous) interpreting, analytical interest in the role of interactional contexts and institutional constraints has been associated with a need for more sociolinguistically and sociologically sensitive models of interpreter-mediated events and of the professional status of interpreting in society.

But it is here, in the areas of theories and models, where the success story of a significantly broadened domain of study begins to turn into an account of deficits and desiderata. Having shown how the remit of Interpreting Studies has become greatly extended and much more complex, I will now move on to discuss the various ways in which the discipline must become *better* and go *further* in order to maintain its momentum.

Better and further...

With so many additional dimensions and factors to take into account—from, say, legal discourse and medical ethics to asylum policy and videoconferencing technology, the goal of developing a coherent set of models and theoretical approaches appears to have become even more elusive. This is not for lack of trying, as insights from discourse studies, interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, pragmatics, social anthropology and critical discourse analysis, among others, have been brought to bear on the subject of interpreting. As in the study of cognitive processes, for which recourse has been made to models and insights from cognitive psychology, interpreting scholars focusing on community-based settings are likely to continue importing analytical schemes from other disciplines.

Among the areas that are particularly in need of development are the notion of context and the impact of contextual variables and constraints on the interactants and their behavior. If context is construed broadly as including the situational and institutional as well as the sociocultural dimensions, accounting for contextual factors requires a way of linking a micro-sociological account of the interaction with macro-sociological structures and dynamics. This is one of the major challenges in the field of sociology, so it is not surprising that interpreting researchers should have difficulty finding solutions of their own—and look to sociology for inspiration. Some of the most promising approaches include the work of Aaron Cicourel (e.g. 1992) and, in particular, Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1991), probably the most frequently cited sociologist in Translation Studies after the “social turn” (cf. Wolf and Fukari 2007). In *Interpreting Studies*, the work of Moira Inghilleri (e.g. 2005) stands out as engaging most intensely with the key notions of Bourdieu’s sociology, proposing an “interpreting habitus” while also casting doubt on the analysis of interpreting as a field in its own right.

Clearly, much more theoretical work needs to be done if interpreting scholars are to do analytical justice to the widening perspective on interpreting as a social practice. By importing concepts and models from social theory, the discipline is bound to be greatly enriched. At the same time, such interdisciplinarity of the importing kind is not without problems. It is invariably difficult to come to a full understanding and critical appreciation of theories developed outside one’s own academic territory, and most borrowing is unavoidably eclectic. Beyond a certain point, however, the selective or customized adoption of theoretical concepts may become a barrier to the kind of reciprocal interdisciplinarity that most would regard as the standard of disciplinary relations to aspire to.

The same applies to the area of methodology, where a full grasp and proficient application of research techniques that evolved in other disciplines are hard to achieve, not least in the field of *Interpreting Studies*, where most

university-level training is geared to professional practice rather than research. Indeed, as Daniel Gile has pointed out many times, graduates of interpreter education programs have generally not been trained to do research, which severely constrains the pool of people available for conducting empirical studies. While the work of pioneer psychologists such as David Gerver (e.g. 1976) has inspired many experimental studies over the years, the interpreting research community has become increasingly aware that ecologically valid controlled experimenting to test hypotheses about interpreters' cognitive processing activities is very hard to do well. Descriptive work based on observations, recordings and surveys has therefore been promoted as a more manageable alternative (e.g. Gile 1998). And yet, designing and implementing such studies also requires great care, and relevant experience and/or expert guidance. Survey research, which appears highly attractive as a methodological approach to research on interpreting and interpreters, is a case in point.

<p>Question x. What is your age group? Please select one of the following: 20-25 years, 26-31 years, 32-40 years, 41-46 years, 47-53 years, 54+years</p> <p>Question y. How long have you been working as a doctor? Please select one of the following: 0-1yrs, 2-5yrs, 5-8yrs, 8-12yrs, 13-18yrs, 19+ yrs</p>
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Figure 1: Excerpt from questionnaire on medical interpreting

Figure 1 is an excerpt from a questionnaire used in a recent PhD thesis on interpreting in health care. Asking questions to elicit demographic background information on the respondents would seem very straightforward. And yet, the age ranges given as response options for Question x are very awkward, to say the least, whereas the ranges offered under Question y, aside from being no less uneven, have overlaps so that a respondent with, say, five years' working experience would face a choice between two applicable response options. Even without considering the implications of such ordinal ranges for data analysis (e.g. when examining age-dependent correlations), question-asking as illustrated above clearly offers much room for improvement.

This example of a poorly designed survey instrument (of which only some rather innocuous items are shown) also serves to make a more fundamental point: Unless interpreting researchers can do better in terms of methodology, the discipline cannot go further in having an impact in the scientific community at large. In the case at hand, a questionnaire by a PhD-

level interpreting researcher is administered to members of a different profession (in this case, medical doctors) and thus conveys an image of research in Interpreting Studies to the broader community. If respondents are given cause not to trust the questionnaire or its author, their professional or scientific bodies may not take interpreting researchers serious enough, for instance when it comes to commissioning a study on language barriers in a hospital system, or engaging in cooperative interdisciplinary research. A questionable piece of research could therefore tend to undermine the *impact* of interpreting research in the wider scientific community. With neither cutting-edge methodological standards nor trusted partners in the relevant disciplines, interpreting researchers' findings for various institutional settings, however relevant they may be, may not gain access to the specialized literature, and it is presumably that literature which represents the state of the art and ultimately informs interpreting-related social practices, whether in an emergency ward, an asylum office or a courtroom.

The implications for the impact of interpreting research have obviously become more pronounced as Interpreting Studies has “gone social” and come to address problems relating not only to interpreting as such but to the institutional contexts in which it takes place. While this makes it more difficult for research to achieve an impact where it matters, it also opens up new opportunities, which I will sum up here under the heading of “market”. Developing the *market* for research by interpreting scholars is one of several areas that seem critical to further progress for the discipline (see Figure 2), as discussed in the following, final section of this paper.

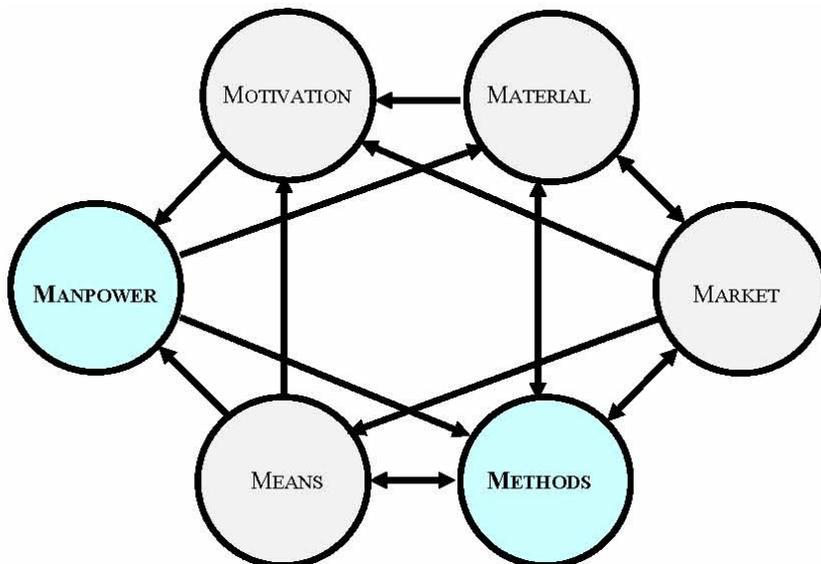


Figure 2: Critical issues for progress in interpreting studies

Developing...

Compared to such fields as computer-assisted technical translation or language transfer in the audiovisual media (including the Internet and video games), interpreters do not have a large base of economically powerful clients with an immediate interest in more advanced translational practices. In the area of international conference interpreting, the European Commission's Directorate General for Interpretation and the United Nations stand out as the prime stakeholders. But, again compared with the domains mentioned above, translation practices in these institutions can be considered rather stable. The main exception is remote interpreting, and there have indeed been several studies to investigate its feasibility and implications (see Mouzourakis 2006). Regrettably, hardly any of these studies were entrusted to researchers whose academic background is in Interpreting Studies, quite possibly because of that field's apparent lack of scientific credibility and expertise.

For interpreting in community-based settings, the market for interpreting research is considerably larger. Legal, healthcare and social service institutions in many countries would benefit from a better understanding of the interpreting services they are or should be using. As organizations in the public domain, however, they often do not have the *means* to commission research projects, nor can they expect the sort of return on investment that motivates software, media and technology corporations to take an interest in or even fund research on translation. Still, such institutions can provide or grant access to the *material* for research, thereby boosting the *motivation* of those with an interest in such work.

However, even when a judicial authority, health maintenance organization or school board does decide that research on interpreting practices is needed, will they turn to a university department ostensibly specialized in this activity? The answer leads back to the problem areas of research expertise (qualified manpower, which in our field would be more appropriately referred to as "womanpower") and *methodology* discussed above. In other words, as desirable as it may be for Interpreting Studies to extend its reach and aim for a greater impact on the state of the art and professional practices in specialized fields involving interpreting, its level of development as a scientific discipline is still quite modest. Further progress in extending the pool of skilled researchers and employing advanced models and methods for data collection and analysis should therefore remain a priority concern.

The goal of research(er) training, in turn, links back to the issue of disciplinary status and institutional frameworks raised by way of introduction. PhD programs in Translation (and Interpreting) Studies have recently attracted much attention, and rightly so. Depending on the regulations adopted (e.g. with or without mandatory coursework, with or without special reference to interpreting), research skills will be imparted (or not) in the

course of doctoral studies programs that will have a duration of three years and cater to graduates of MA programs in Translation and Interpreting. But even where a structured set of PhD courses on theory and methodology will be offered, it seems essential to try to introduce future scholars to the foundations and basic methods of scientific work even before they enroll in a PhD program. In MA programs with a distinctly professional orientation, this may seem difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, considering that many (post)graduate courses will have a thesis requirement, introductory lectures and seminars on theory and methodology should be an integral part in the MA-level curriculum.

By way of example, the new BA/MA curricula for Translation and Interpreting at the University of Vienna, adopted in 2007, take this idea even further: An introduction to basic concepts of Translation Studies, with a seminar on academic writing skills, is provided already in the undergraduate curriculum. Lectures and seminars at the MA level, focusing either on translation or on interpreting, build on these foundations and should enable students to complete an MA thesis (worth 20 ECTS credit points out of the total 120 ECTS credits for the two-year MA). With a total of 16 ECTS credits, the theoretical and methodological coursework at the MA level is still marginal compared to the practice-oriented interpreting courses offered in the various language combinations and the two specializations (conference interpreting and dialogue interpreting). Even so, these curricular arrangements express the conviction that developing Interpreting Studies in the critical areas of (wo)manpower and methodology should start as early as possible, providing those interested in PhD studies with a solid foundation on which to build their innovative work to shape the future of research on interpreting.

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