Book Review: Linguistic Coping Strategies in Sign Language Interpreting

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Open Forum: Book Review

The republication of Napier's influential doctoral thesis ensures the continued availability of this detailed version of her original study. Her research focused on two linguistic coping strategies used by signed language interpreters in educational settings: *translational style* and *omissions*. The study additionally examined whether the interpreters' own educational backgrounds impacted their use of these strategies, a relevant issue given that many interpreters working within higher education at the time were not university educated.

Omissions have traditionally been considered errors, but Napier argues that they can be used intentionally as linguistic coping strategies. Like Wadensjö (1998), she adopts an interactional perspective on interpreting, but she develops her own omissions taxonomy that provides valuable distinctions between conscious and deliberate use of omissions and those made unconsciously. However, it is her exploration of interpreters' metacognitive awareness about their omissions, and the analysis of omission frequency, that provides the main substance of this work.

The Prologue outlines the key concepts, and Chapter 1 provides further scene setting, with detail on the various models of interpreting and a focus on interpreting between signed and spoken language. Chapter 2 introduces the notion of *coping strategies,* broadly defined as ways in which interpreters ensure the fluidity of their work. Napier's was one of the earlier doctoral studies into signed language interpreting, when there was a scarcity of similar literature to draw upon. Nevertheless, she provides extensive description of studies on turn-taking (Roy, 2000) and interpreter neutrality (Metzger, 1999), in which she identifies useful parallels in relation to the consciousness of interpreters' decision making. Chapter 3 continues the literature review with an exploration of interpreting in educational and conference settings, both environments involving similar use of formal register and specialized lexicon.

Napier outlines her research questions and method in Chapter 4. The study involved 10 interpreters who each produced an Australian Sign Language (Auslan) interpretation from a recording of a university lecture. The participants were then involved in a task review and interview, to gauge their degree of awareness of the challenges they encountered. Napier reports the study's findings in Chapter 5, which contains rather dense and lengthy passages of text that might have been broken up by subheadings for greater accessibility. Given the small sample size and the varied demographics of the participants, the numerical reporting of the data has its limitations; of far greater value is the qualitative analysis of the relationship between the omissions and the source text.

Napier continues this analysis in Chapter 6. Her data illustrate how interpreters strategically switch between free and literal interpretation styles, a combination particularly suited to the higher education context, where fingerspelling can be an important element for conveying subject-specific terminology in signed language. However, incorporating the perspective of D/deaf students, Napier discovered a variety of preferences and expectations about interpretation style. Most students preferred that interpreters working in this context be university educated, and they valued interpreters' subject knowledge and ability to develop rapport. These attributes have recently gained attention across a range of interpreting contexts (e.g., Dickinson, 2014; Hauser & Hauser, 2008; Hlavac, Xu, & Yong, 2015; Hsieh, Ju, & Kong, 2010; Major, 2013; Schofield & Mapson, 2014). Napier's study also reveals useful detail about the differences in interpreting in university lectures and tutorials, and the impact of translation style on students' ability to take notes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the rate of omissions was highest among interpreters who were unfamiliar with the subject matter. The breakdown of different omission types will interest student interpreters and more experienced practitioners working in new contexts. Seven lines within the source text proved the most challenging to all participants, and Napier identifies five problematic textual feature types: (a) unfamiliar or subject-specific terms, (b) idiomatic expressions, (c) proper nouns, (d) repetition and (e) ambiguity. Most omissions occurred within lexically dense text that was often grammatically complex and highly subject-specific; challenges were greater for interpreters unfamiliar with the topic. The discussion about interpreters' metalinguistic awareness of omissions could have included more of participants' own comments, but the data provide valuable evidence of interpreters' metacognitive processing and the need for dynamic decision making.

Although Napier's analysis does not identify any relationship between omissions and interpreters' educational background, her participants made these connections explicit. They commented on how familiarity with the topic area and the discourse environment, gained through their own educational experience, gave them greater confidence in their interpreting ability. However, during interviews, D/deaf consumers revealed a rather uneasy attitude towards omissions; only one of the four participants considered strategic omissions to be appropriate.

Napier astutely relates this to a perception of omissions as errors, and to deeper concerns around consumer–interpreter trust.

From the different categories of conscious omissions, Napier describes only *strategic conscious omissions* as a linguistic coping strategy. This may be because their strategic use was successful, but of course not all coping strategies, or *controls* (Dean & Pollard, 2001), are employed to good effect. It would therefore be valuable in any future extension or replication of this study to also evaluate the effectiveness of the interpretations produced. A similar complication surrounds discussion about the influence of educational background and subject familiarity, as the two interpreters without a university background were also unfamiliar with the subject area. This is perhaps a missed opportunity to demonstrate the value of university education, and an update on the current proportion of university-trained interpreters would have been a useful addition to the introduction of this second edition.

The brief Introduction to the second edition, which follows the Prologue, situates the study 15 years on from the original publication. Interpreting studies, particularly in the field of signed language interpreting, has grown significantly in the intervening period, and it is something of a hard task to reflect this in any detail within six pages. Napier's thesis led to many subsequent studies by Napier herself, often with a common thread of ascertaining the perspectives of D/deaf consumers. It has also informed the work of other researchers, who have adopted her omission taxonomy as well as her concept of strategic omission.

Although the study focuses on sociolinguistic influences, Napier might have made more explicit connections between interpreting and the growing focus on *intersectionality* within sociolinguistics. That is, while educational background and familiarity with the subject matter are both valuable considerations, it would be helpful to situate them within the plethora of sociolinguistic factors that impact on each interpreter and their practice.

Linguistic Coping Strategies in Sign Language Interpreting is generally an accessible read, and the second edition provides a valuable resource to student and novice interpreters. It is particularly useful for signed language interpreters as they reflect on their work in higher education. Interpreter trainers can use the book in several ways. First, the book is a useful guide to different omission types and their causes. Second, Napier details issues of interpreting style, which she recommends incorporating into interpreter training to educate students on how to use these styles strategically to best effect. Third, the use of metalinguistic reviews adopted in the study can be employed in training situations to help students develop metacognitive awareness and facilitate evaluations of their own practice. Fourth, Napier's analysis will help students develop an awareness of the different omission types and relate them to the five problematic types of textual feature. Thus students can then develop their own strategic use of omissions, and reduce the number of unconscious omissions made. Finally, for interpreters of every experiential level, the study reinforces the value of familiarity with style of discourse, subject matter and terminology.

Read today, the findings from this early doctoral study into signed language interpreting may be less surprising than they were when the study was originally conducted, but at that time they provided fresh insight into translation style and omissions in the university context. Gallaudet University Press has done interpreters, interpreter trainers, and student interpreters a great service by continuing to make this book available.

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