

Book Review: Signed Language Interpretation and Translation Research. Selected papers from the first International Symposium

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Open Forum: Book Review

Kudos to Brenda Nicodemus of Gallaudet University for convening a symposium that promotes research on sign language interpreting, and for co-editing this volume of selected papers with Keith Cagle to disseminate some of the scholarship that is advancing theory and practice in the field. The 2013 symposium spanned interpreting and translation research, but nine of the 10 chapters address interpreting, seven presenting work on ASL–English, with a chapter each from Italy and Brazil, and one on ASL–Spanish interpreting in the United States. Author bios are not included, but most contributors appear to be ‘practisearchers’ – bringing insider knowledge of interpreting to formulate the kinds of research questions that concern practitioners. The calibre of studies selected for this volume reflects the cumulative impact of sign language interpreting becoming a subject of graduate level study, which develops practitioners equipped for critical enquiry. The engagement with theory in this volume also demonstrates that sign language interpreting research is forging deeper and wider links with scholarship in translation and interpretation studies and sociolinguistics, and is a growing presence in these spaces.

Eileen Forestal, a deaf scholar, opens the volume with a call for hearing interpreters and researchers to proactively partner with deaf people in the conception and execution of interpreting research, arguing that the professionalization of interpreting has effectively excluded the deaf community from shaping professional practice paradigms. This is a polemic piece in which Forestal issues a strong reminder about the fundamental relevance of diverse deaf perspectives to researchers, trainers, practitioners: “How deaf people talk about interpreters and other hearing people who have an impact on them and their lives demands our attention”. At the other end of the book, Annette Miner’s study of relationships between deaf professionals and designated interpreters demonstrates the value of interrogating complementary perspectives of deaf people and interpreters who work together. Both groups highlight the relational work that effective designated interpreters do, such as passing on overheard information, or conveying side comments or tone. ‘Community of practice’ would be a relevant concept here to explain designated interpreters’ efforts to adopt workplace discourse norms when mediating a Deaf person’s membership of that community. Interviews with Deaf professionals note how subtleties of interpreter positioning (proxemics) and personality can impact their connection with work associates. Miner notes that the expectation for a designated interpreter to be socially embedded with extended responsibility for mediation of relationships, and to remain on task at all hours differs from typical practice in community interpreting situations. To my mind, this begs a question: Why is our profession comfortable with an overtly ‘supportive’ relationship and scope of responsibility for interpreters working for relatively empowered deaf professionals, but wary of extending role responsibilities to provide relational and informational ‘support’ to the least empowered deaf individuals in welfare, healthcare and legal contexts? Perhaps because these clients have less social capital at stake, are not in a position to demand that interpreters meet these interactional needs, or because these institutional encounters impose constraints (actual or assumed)? A topic for the next symposium, perhaps (and see Brunson, this volume).

Three chapters focus on the sources and effects of interpreters becoming visible as participants. Del Vecchio, Cardarelli, De Simone and Petitta ask whether interactions with an interpreter around the edges of the translation task help or hinder communication among parties. Specifically, they consider interpreter-directed talk within the macro-context for interpreting in Italy, wherein weak recognition of sign language and the professional role of interpreters can serve to disrupt normative interaction between interpreters and deaf and hearing interlocutors. Common disruptions are questions, apologies and suggestions addressed directly to the interpreter by hearing and deaf participants, and the authors consider whether these acts compromise role boundaries, or should rather be considered a form of ‘co-translation’ (such as a request for clarification or suggestion of a more apposite sign). The authors extensively review theoretical work on the interpreter as a visible participant and their discussion categorises observed types of participant-generated acts that impact interpreters’ construction of role. I would have liked more detail about how the authors mined the large corpus of data described at the outset, and more examples from the data to exemplify their points.

On a similar theme, Annie Marks examines interpreter-initiated footing shifts in simulated interpreted video/phone calls, finding that interpreter ‘authored’ contributions tend to be prompted by technological demands which require the interpreter to insert pauses or explanation. Marks notes that caller perceptions of these regulating moves is yet unstudied: When the interpreter’s own ‘voice’ intrudes into the interaction, does this clarify or confuse? This study illustrates the complexity of the multimodal task in technology-mediated interpreting, offering useful material for pre- and in-service training.

Open Forum: Book Review

Stephanie Feyne reports an empirical study that investigates how discourse features of voiced interpretations affect a hearing listener's assessment of a deaf speaker's professional identity. Hearing professionals' commentary on a series of alternate interpretations of the same ASL content revealed that they perceive interpreting as a 'verbatim' act, and attribute flaws or style in the interpretation directly to the deaf person, and assess their expertise accordingly. Feyne identifies teaching points from the findings, commenting that gaining familiarity with theories of identity construction may enable interpreters to critically monitor the likely effects of their interpretation decisions in any setting.

Two chapters offer perspectives on conceptualising the task of interpreting: Campbell McDermid zooms in to look at literal and pragmatic meaning in utterances and how interpreters render these, while Jeremy Brunson pans out to a wider view of social processes and power relations that frame the whole activity of interpreting. Brunson's piece shifts focus away from the product of interpretation, to highlight that interaction among deaf, hearing and interpreter interlocutors is embedded in larger social systems that affect how interpreted encounters proceed. The chapter reviews fundamental sociological concepts—social relations (e.g., power, gender, race), institutions, structures, and personal agency—and exemplifies how these factors play out in interpreting scenarios. Brunson does not claim to present a coherent 'theory of interpretation' but raises awareness of how sociological factors are implicit in motives, constraints, actions, practices and outcomes in interpreted situations. Recognizing these underlying factors can at least give interpreters critical perspective on their responses to the dynamics in a given situation.

McDermid's chapter, "A Pragmatic Multidimensional Model of the Interpreting Process", summarises important concepts in pragmatic meaning, and reminds us that interpreters choose the extent to which they transfer literal, pragmatically enriched, and implied meaning from a source message into the target language. These three levels of meaning are richly illustrated by data from his study which applied this framework to analysing a set of parallel interpretations, showing that levels of meaning conveyed in a target text can be differentiated and measured; overall, only 50% of utterances in the English source text were pragmatically enriched or disambiguated beyond a literal level in interpreters' ASL renditions. The framework and evidence in this paper suggest a valuable resource for teaching interpreters to attend to differences in the way that pragmatic meaning is encoded and understood by spoken and signed language users, and to nudge them to work beyond the literal level.

Three chapters in the volume address dilemmas of equivalence. Quinto-Pozos, Alley, Casanova de Canales and Treviño investigate how trilingual interpreters working in a videophone interpreting context bridge grammatical and pragmatic differences between ASL and Spanish—specifically, how they approach the problem of selecting Spanish gendered nouns and pronouns that mark gender and social distance when the relevant person information is not available in ASL morphology, nor in visible cues about a speaker on the phone. Their study of mock VRS calls found that in the absence of contextual or linguistic clues, interpreters defaulted to masculine noun forms, but varied in their selection of formal/informal addressee pronouns, although they used similar strategies to make their decision. Beyond the challenges of working in a language pair that is morphologically mismatched, Quinto-Pozos et al. point out that the study illustrates how interpreters constantly make decisions that "involve careful consideration of context, interpersonal dynamics between speakers and addressees, and sociocultural norms of communication".

Linguistic and technical challenges in translating subject-specific university entrance exams into Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), as supported by policy in a Brazilian university, are described by Müller de Quadros, Oliveira, Nunes de Sousa and Dutra Vargas. Their detailed account of steps and strategies to produce a viable 'intermodal translation' (from print to video) will be a useful reference for others translating standardised tests or exams. A key challenge was rendering technical subject vocabulary in Libras; solutions included fingerspelling followed by explanation, a technical (low frequency) sign, or a neologism. These strategies reflect spontaneous practices by signers in new domains, but suggest additional cognitive load for a deaf test-taker in processing novel linguistic forms as well as the content and intent of questions. Deaf test-taker perspectives and outcomes from the translated exams would be worth investigating.

Interpreters' decisions and views about using English idioms in ASL-to-English interpretation is the subject of a chapter by Santiago, Barrick and Jennings. They report results of an experimental interpreting task (ASL–English) and exploration of interpreter metacognition about when and why they use or avoid idioms in their English output, revealing some interesting perceptions about register and relational effects of idioms. I had a question mark around the ASL source text including borrowed English idioms, which would seem to prompt

Open Forum: Book Review

transfer of those idioms into the target-language text, as opposed to examining interpreters' spontaneous use of English idioms for other reasons. Nevertheless, these authors present an innovative treatment of this topic.

A strength across the studies is the use of multiple methods to address research questions: Most studies included objective analysis of interpreted texts complemented by participant reflection on interpreting process or impacts, or they include perspectives from more than one set of participants. In each case this enriches insight on the topic, informing readers about not only about conditions and products of interpreting/translating, but also about processes of interpreter metacognition and how contextual factors (outside of texts) contribute to interpretation outcomes.

Sign language and interpreting researchers should have this volume, as a solid collection of contemporary research that suggests further questions, including studies that describe methodologies which could be replicated. Interpreting educators will find material here that can be applied in class to stimulate thinking about interactional dimensions of interpreting, as well as experimental evidence that demonstrates how experienced interpreters deal with specific challenges. Because the studies mainly originate from practitioners who are motivated to unpack interpreting to improve professional competence, many chapters will be of interest to advanced students of interpreting who have had some exposure to practice realities. The volume is an excellent resource for interpreters seeking material for professional development activities, such as a research reading circle; working interpreters will find jumping-off points for self-reflection and action research throughout this book. I look forward to a second volume in the series.