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Interpretation Research: A New Impetus?

Abstract

Attitudinal changes are a salient recent development in the interpreting research community. They include an aspiration to science and to interdisciplinarity. However, such an aspiration is difficult to implement because of training- and motivation-related constraints, as well as difficulties in access to field data. The most promising avenues for development lie in research promotion policies in interpretation schools, and in the involvement of non-interpreting researchers in interpretation research.

1. Introduction

Reflection on conference interpreting by teachers of interpretation started in the fifties with the well-known classics by Herbert (1952) and Rozan (1959). It then became more ambitious, with a few attempts at scientific investigation by linguists and psychologists. After a few years, practicing interpreters took over; with a few exceptions, they reverted to personal speculation, sometimes written up in academic language which, combined with normative principles on how interpretation *should* be conducted and taught, solidified into dogma. For reasons best explained in sociological terms (see Gile forthcoming), this dogma prevailed among interpretation schools for more than fifteen years. The crust cracked in the late eighties when an increasing number of practitioners-cum-researchers (“practisearchers”), who wished to adopt a more scientific approach in their investigation of interpretation, gained enough strength to break through and bring about a period of renewal (see Gile 1994 and Gile forthcoming).

A recent international conference on interpreting research was held in Turku in August 1994. It was the first of its kind since the 1977 Venice conference, which had brought together for the first time practicing interpreters and non-interpreting researchers (the pro-

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ceedings of this conference were published as Gerver and Sinaiko 1978). The Turku meeting, which was well-attended by representatives of the new generation of practisearchers as well as by some non-interpreters from disciplines relevant to interpretation research, was the locus of much interaction which can be used as an indicator for an updated analysis of activities in the field. This paper takes a look at trends and prospects on the basis of past and present research, with an update in the light of the Turku conference.

2. Aspiring to science

One clear trend that emerges from recent publications and from the exchanges heard during the Turku conference is that a more scientifically oriented paradigm is continuing to gain weight among interpretation investigators. Moser-Mercer (1994) refers to two communities of interpreters engaged in such investigation; in their endeavours, the approach of one is close to that of the liberal arts, and the approach of the other is closer to that of the natural sciences. Moser-Mercer calls for a productive interaction between the two. The present situation does not meet this wish: there is no dialogue between the “liberal arts community” (i.e. those engaged in introspection and speculative theorizing - see Gile 1990), which occupied most of the publication space in the seventies and early eighties, and the “natural sciences” community, (which could be called the “aspiring-to-science community”, as it cannot really be said to have attained scientific status as yet - see Arjona Tseng 1989, Gile 1991). However, there has been a shift in the balance of power. The “liberal arts community” is losing ground, with a much smaller share in the publication space than in the past, very little participation in international translation and interpretation conferences, and very few new members (see Gile forthcoming). On the other hand, the aspiring-to-science community has taken the lion’s share both in recent publications and in conference participation. The Turku conference is an extreme example thereof: out of about 150 participants, a handful at most belonged to the “liberal arts community”, and the atmosphere was definitely one of aspiration to science. There were very few normative statements, and the need to conduct more empirical research to find facts and to see what other disciplines had to offer was very much at the centre of the discussions. Since the theme of the conference and its objectives were precisely set along such

lines, it is not surprising that participants who came adhered to them. More significant are the *large number* of participants - more than one hundred, while there are only about 300 authors of texts on interpreting for the whole period extending from 1986 to 1993 - and the consensus which emerged. What is yet more important, the aspiring-to-science community is increasing in size with young newcomers on the practitioners' side, as explained further down, and is strengthened by the interest of a few outsiders from linguistics, psycholinguistics and other cognitive sciences, who work within a scientific paradigm.

This aspiration-to-science trend is also salient in recent publications, starting with many papers appearing in Trieste's *The Interpreter's Newsletter*, in graduation theses completed in Finland (for lists see *The IRTIN Bulletin*), in the latest doctoral dissertations, each having at least one empirical component (Pöchhacker 1992 and Stolz 1992), and in a book on empirical research just published (Lambert and Moser-Mercer 1994). This does not mean that the liberal-arts-type essays have disappeared. The opposite is true: most translation and interpretation conferences and journals do not use scientific standards for their selection of contributions, and the majority of papers which are published on interpreting are still introspective and/or normative essays (see for instance Dollerup and Lindegaard 1994 and Snell-Hornby et al. 1994, as well as the various issues of *Meta*, *Babel*, *Fremdsprachen* and other translation journals). However, the contributions which are taken notice of, discussed and developed in the literature are increasingly science-oriented, while in the past, the literature consisted to a large extent of repetitive normative statements.

3. In search of interdisciplinarity

A second trend which can be seen clearly in the development of interpretation research in the past few years is increasing openness towards other disciplines and an awareness of the desirability of interdisciplinary work (though actual interdisciplinary operations are still very rare, as discussed in a later part of this paper). During the seventies and first half of the eighties, the most influential practi-searchers not only thought they were capable of investigating interpreting on their own, but also claimed that they were the only ones qualified to do so; the present majority in the interpretation research scene seems quite explicit in recognizing the value of contributions

from other disciplines, in particular cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, and also, to a lesser extent, linguistics and neuropsychology (for a list of 'paradigms' from such disciplines that could be usefully imported into interpreting research, see Shlesinger forthcoming). Indeed, a number of studies conducted by practisearchers involve linguistics and neurolinguistics (see for example Shlesinger 1994 and Daro 1994).

On the other hand, a few non-interpreters have produced research on interpreting from psychological angles (Lambert 1989, Dillinger 1989), physiological angles (Klonowicz 1994, Tommola and Niemi 1986) and neurological angles (Fabbro and Gran 1994, Green et al. 1994). Judging by the presence at the Turku conference of a number of such outsiders - though Lambert, Schweda-Nicholson and Tommola have been involved in interpreting to such an extent that their status can no longer be said to be that of complete outsiders - this beginning trend may well continue and gain strength. This would be a welcome 'second wave' after an initial interest in the late sixties and early seventies which died down after a few years, probably to a significant extent because of the interpreters' negative and hostile attitude (see Gile 1994 and Gile forthcoming).

A third form of interdisciplinarity can be seen through a yet embryonic mode of interdisciplinary research, in which interpreters work with non-interpreters. This format is particularly salient at the Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori (SSLM) of Trieste, where the neurologist Fabbro has been working with the interpreter and interpreting teacher Gran, and supervising interpreting students in research on linguistic lateralization, which resulted in several publications (see Gran and Taylor 1990 and the successive issues of *The Interpreter's Newsletter*). A few other isolated cases of such cooperation seem to have started elsewhere, for instance in Vienna, with a project analyzing EEG activity in the interpreters' brain (Kurz 1994 and Petsche 1993).

The fourth manifestation of interdisciplinarity is seen in a small number of researchers who have acquired a dual competence, one in interpreting and one in another relevant discipline. The phenomenon is not totally new: for example, Kurz, the author of the first Ph.D. dissertation on interpreting by an interpreter (Pinter 1969), was a trained psychologist - in fact, her Ph.D. degree was awarded to her in psychol-

ogy. It also seems that researchers in interpreting in the USSR acquired some expertise in psycholinguistics (see Cenkova, forthcoming). However, the number of such cases was - and remains - small, though the contribution of one or two highly motivated persons to interpretation research can become very important, as has been the case in the past. The innovation may reside in the fact that some interpreters now acquire such expertise deliberately for research purposes. One interesting case is that of Daro in Trieste, who was initially trained as an interpreter, and then acquired expertise in cognitive psychology and neurolinguistics through regular work with Fabbro - rather than through formal training. Could this become a model for dual expertise acquisition? Probably not, unless other non-interpreting researchers become as involved as Fabbro with interpretation research in cooperation with an interpretation school, *and* research is strongly encouraged in that school, *and* a way is found to sustain the students' motivation for research over a period long enough for them to acquire such expertise. The last condition is the most difficult to meet, as explained below.

4. Obstacles to research

In spite of these recent attitudinal changes in the community of interpretation researchers, in terms of actual work done, progress is still very slow. Not that publications are scarce - far from that. As can be seen through the bibliographical section of the successive issues of *The IRTIN Bulletin*, which is published twice a year, the number of publications on interpreting continues to increase. However, few of them report new research, be it on a theoretical level, or, more strikingly, on an empirical level. In this context, it is significant that in Lambert and Moser-Mercer's recent book (1994), which, in principle, is devoted to empirical research, about a third of the papers do not report empirical research at all, and in those that do, very little is new. This lack of progress can be explained by several factors, in particular the following:

- a. Most of the people engaged in interpretation research are professional interpreters. Although nearly all of them are also interpretation teachers in schools affiliated with academic institutions, few are full-time academics. Therefore, they do not come under pressure to do research and/or publish. In fact, in translation and interpretation schools worldwide, most of the positions do not even require an M.A. or a Ph.D.

from applicants, as such schools are essentially vocational and pride themselves on having competent professionals rather than academics as teachers (see AIIC 1979, which still reflects the views of most interpretation school leaders, as echoed in Mackintosh forthcoming). Neither is research in interpreting rewarding in any institutional or financial way, if one sets aside the occasional funds made available for participation in international conferences for a few researchers. There is therefore no strong external incentive to conduct research.

Moreover, being mostly successful professional conference interpreters, teachers tend to work full-time in their professional capacity as interpreters, and teaching comes on top, which reduces substantially the time left for research. Empirical research, with its careful recording and analysis of data, i.e. basically speeches and their interpretation, requires dozens if not hundreds of hours for even the smallest projects. Writing essays requires much less time and efforts than conducting empirical research. The gratifying outcome, namely publication, is equally accessible in both options. The law of least effort therefore tends to favor the former type of activity over the other, the more so since the interpretation research community still has not established rigorous scientific standards for its publication policy, and authors tend to be quoted for their personal, often unsubstantiated opinions, more than for actual findings.

b. Most interpreters and interpretation teachers with academic degrees in fields other than translation or interpretation are graduates of foreign languages and/or cultures departments. Only a few practitioners have a solid background in an established scientific discipline such as linguistics or psychology, even fewer have been involved in research in these disciplines, and even those, being engaged in professional interpreting, have generally not kept abreast of recent developments in their former field as full-time researchers working in the discipline do.

c. Access to the necessary input for empirical studies is problematic. Not only is it difficult to obtain the conference organisers' permission to use the speeches held in conferences and their interpretation for research purposes, but interpreters themselves are reluctant to be recorded and analyzed. Moreover, for many empirical studies, various types of equipment for data processing, physiological measurements,

etc. are necessary and only available in the relevant research laboratories and university departments, not in translation and interpretation schools.

5. Prospects

5.1. Prospects in the translation and interpretation schools

No sign seems to herald a change in these fundamental factors in the near future. Interpretation schools remain highly vocational in their function and philosophy, with practicing interpreters as teachers. Most of the students still come from the same departments of foreign languages and cultures, most are intent on acquiring a professional qualification and have no particular reason to be interested in research. In some schools for instance in Heidelberg, Vienna and Prague, they write graduation theses, but these are mostly terminological, that is more practical than theoretical or research-oriented, which is understandable, as such theses are easier to complete and have a higher potential value to their authors in their subsequent professional activities.

One exception is the SSLM of the University of Trieste, which has been producing much (or comparatively much - given the small total mass of empirical research in the field) empirical research since the latter part of the eighties (see Gran and Taylor 1990 and the successive issues of *The Interpreter's Newsletter*). This is an interesting case, which deserves close scrutiny in order to find out what factors make such a production possible. One obviously important ingredient of this activity is the strong involvement of the leaders of the school and of the teaching staff in research. The same degree of involvement amongst the teachers is difficult to find elsewhere. One should note that the school leaders' involvement seems to be equally high at the Ecole Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT) in Paris. However, the vast majority of interpretation teachers at ESIT do not seem to share the leaders' interest in research. Moreover, at ESIT, research is part of the doctoral program, offered *after* graduation, when students have left school with their professional qualification and have no special reason to come back for research training - which does not contribute anything to their professional qualification; in Trieste, students are introduced to research while they are still training to become interpreters, since a thesis is part of their graduation requirements. One might also add that

there is no tradition of empirical research at ESIT, where the vast majority of publications are essays rather than reports on attempts to produce new knowledge.

Therefore, in spite of the changes in attitudes mentioned in the beginning of this paper, it does not seem reasonable to expect a radical change in the picture in the coming years as far as translation and interpreting schools and as far as practisearchers go. Further research production can be expected from Trieste, as well as a few empirical projects from other schools with a graduation thesis system, mostly in German-speaking countries and in Scandinavian countries, in particular Finland, which has been promoting empirical research in translation studies (see for example Tirkkonen-Condit 1991), including interpretation. Another possibly promising centre might be the newly created Institute for Translation and Interpreting in Prague, which is in the process of setting up a doctoral program in translation studies under a dynamic leadership. However, research-type graduation theses will probably not be numerous in the near future, mostly because of lacking motivation and facilitating institutional factors as described above.

5.2. Research by non-interpreters

Clearly, both motivation and availability for research are to be found in 'purely' academic and research circles. The question is whether researchers in such circles, mainly those working in the most relevant disciplines, such as cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, and more generally the cognitive sciences, can be induced to engage in investigations on interpreting.

The problem is that a significant gap exists between the 'level' of investigation such scientists are interested in and the level most relevant to interpreters. Psychologists and neuropsychologists generally focus on the operations of the cognitive system at a very fundamental level, but few of them attempt to investigate more complex activities occurring in the field in which single processes are very difficult to identify in their tangle of interactions. They tend to investigate issues such as the make-up of memory, with questions such as "are there distinct memories for visually presented information and for acoustically presented information?" or "Under what conditions does an early or late bilingual use his/her right/left hemisphere for various language-related activities?" and most of their research is experimental, with strictly

controlled conditions far removed from interpreting conditions: they often use isolated words or images as a stimulus to elicit rather strictly defined recall and recognition responses (for a wide range of examples in cognitive psychology, see for instance Eysenck and Keane 1990). Clearly, while both the input and output of interpretation are easier to observe and to measure than many other types of input and output of human activity occurring in the field, the processes involved remain extremely complex as far as psychological investigation is concerned. Using interpretation to test such fundamental questions is therefore problematic. As to the interpreters, for the same reasons, they cannot derive many 'usable' results in interpreting from findings obtained in experiments conducted in an environment so far removed from their own. During the Turku conference, this became frustratingly clear to some practitioners and led to a debate about "boxology", as it was referred to humorously. Scientists tend to break down interpretation into boxes, then divide these into smaller boxes and so on, without necessarily being able to bring them all together again with findings that would apply to interpretation as a consolidated process.

Similarly, linguists not dealing with cognitive aspects of language, for instance theoretical linguists and descriptive linguists, work in a way which is somewhat difficult to reconcile with the efforts of interpreting researchers, whose main interest lies in the use of language in a particular communication situation and under particular cognitive constraints.

The gap between such research and interpretation research is to be seen most clearly in published empirical research, where the practitioners' projects are generally 'holistic', and deal with particular aspects of interpretation performance or products (strategies, errors, linguistic transformations, phonological aspects of the product, etc.), not with fundamental cognitive processes as such.

Because of all the factors mentioned above, and in particular due to the status of training and motivation in the interpreting research community, this situation is not likely to change soon either. One should not, however, conclude hastily that interpreting research by non-interpreters is not possible. There are places where the preoccupations of both communities meet, mostly in applied research. Several such cases have been mentioned above. The work of David Gerver, a psychologist who focused on interpreting rather than on single cognitive operations,

should also be mentioned (see Gerver 1976). As further examples, in applied linguistics, and in particular, in second language acquisition, as well as in the field of languages in contact, joint research would seem quite natural: language proficiency, though theoretically a prerequisite for interpreters, has been an important issue in interpretation schools, and the fields of bilingualism and languages in contact are also of interest to both applied linguists and interpreters. Similarly, in the field of communication, joint empirical research on information reception and quality perception could provide both interpreters and communication scientists with directly applicable results which are urgently needed if students are to be taught interpreting strategies on the basis of market needs and wishes - rather than on the basis of their teachers' normative views.

The main problem lies in establishing active cooperation with the relevant research communities, which is not as easy as it would seem to be at first sight. A major reason for this difficulty may lie with institutional factors: active researchers in universities and research laboratories are generally engaged in ongoing research, either as project leaders or as team members. In both cases, it may be difficult for them to disengage themselves from such projects and go off in a very different direction, especially in a field that is not well established in the academic world and in which the potential for further development is difficult to ascertain. Though an enterprising researcher might jump at the occasion to start a new venture, after many unsuccessful attempts by the author of this paper to establish contacts with scientists in relevant disciplines (and, happily, a few successes at long last), it can only be observed that it may take quite some time and possibly specific circumstances before such academic 'adventurers' are found. Theoretically, it should be easier to attract students starting an M.A. or a Ph.D., who may still be less strongly constrained by ongoing research in their department. Indeed, a few such cases have been observed, starting with Barik (1969), followed by Gerver (1970), Lambert (1983) and Dillinger (1989). It is significant that Barik and Dillinger, though both academically active, are no longer involved in interpreting. Lambert has crossed over into interpretation training (though she is not an interpreter herself). The only person who did seem to remain in his former research community while continuing to engage in interpreting research was the late Gerver.

Another difficulty in establishing such contacts is the underdeveloped (or, to be more politically correct, the *developing*) status of interpretation research as regards scientific norms, which has been mentioned in the literature since the seventies, but which still persists (see Gile forthcoming for a longer analysis).

The issue is therefore a difficult one, with a vicious circle leading from the absence of an established research discipline in interpreting to a difficulty in establishing contacts with non-interpreting researchers, and from that difficulty to an extremely slow progress of research towards the establishment of such a discipline.

Nevertheless, while prevailing conditions are not favorable to an overall development of such research, they leave room for single cases. One such example (but not the only one) is that of Bill Isham, an academic who is also a Sign Language interpreter, who has training in psychology, and who is interested in research on interpreting (see for instance Isham 1994). Keeping in mind the sum and influence of the research done by single individuals, in particular by Gerver in the 70's, in view of the fact that relatively little has changed since then from the psychological angle, the contribution of a small number of such individuals can be quite significant.

6. The leaders

In view of the rather unfavorable institutional situation as outlined above, the role of the individual leaders of the interpretation movement continues to be important. Previous leaders have not changed in their approach, as can be seen from their publications, which continue to carry the same normative-speculative approach as in past years, the same ideas, the same total lack of references to recent studies relevant to matters they address (see for instance Brisset 1993 and Pöchhacker 1994:22). The fact that they are less frequently seen in translation and interpretation conferences, that they are less often published in edited collections of papers and in translation journals, and that they are less often quoted in new publications, shows that they are in the process of losing their influence over the interpreting research community. This process of attrition is probably due to a large part to the emergence of the aspiration-to-science paradigm rather than to a weakness of these leaders themselves. In the pre-scientific paradigm, they were seen by the interpreting research and theory community as 'masters of truth', as

one plenary speaker at the Turku conference referred to them; by nature, the scientific paradigm calls for discussion and falsification of theories, which is a denial of this role.

The new leaders of the movement, who are not in a position of ‘masters of truth’, are also interpreters who teach interpreting, who have rather comfortable professional and academic positions, and who are now in their forties and fifties. It therefore seems unlikely that many of them will devote at this point in their career much of their time to the acquisition of solid knowledge in psychology, in linguistics etc. and to high-level research compatible with prevailing norms in these disciplines. It is much more likely that they will have a major role in *stimulating* younger researchers and *organizing* research, in particular by suggesting research directions and by organizing communication between members of the research community, while continuing to conduct research at their own level, rather holistic and methodologically simple. In a way, like their predecessors of the previous generation of leaders, they should form a transient leadership, to be replaced in due course by new leaders with more technical knowhow, acquired earlier in life and in the course of their careers. The question is whether today’s leaders will have the wisdom to accept the transient nature of their authority, or whether they will try to cling to their positions, in particular by refusing to acknowledge the contribution of a younger generation to come.

7. Conclusion

The analysis presented in the preceding pages leads to the conclusion that some changes have indeed occurred on the interpreting research scene in the past few years:

- Former leaders have lost power, and new leaders have emerged,
- Attitudes have become more open and have been turning in particular towards empirical research and interdisciplinarity,
- A few non-interpreters are becoming interested in interpreting research again.

However, except for the SSLM in Trieste, little has radically changed on the institutional side, and interpreting research continues to be slowed down in its progress by limitations in training, motivation and availability. While attitudes have advanced, there does not seem to be

much evidence of the emergence of a significant new impetus in actual research. In order for interpretation research to achieve sustainable development, the following conditions seem necessary (for a more detailed discussion, see Gile forthcoming):

- Research incentives should be given in interpretation school, as part of the interpretation curriculum (however, it is only fair to say that whether this is useful for the students in terms of *professional training* as such is debatable). One such incentive is the graduation thesis system.
- Interpretation teachers should be encouraged to do more research. This implies institutional changes, and in particular stricter academic requirements from part of the teaching staff (but only part of it, for fear of losing the practical, professional expertise to academicism).
- Formal training in research methods should be provided whenever possible, in interpretation schools, but also, on a case by case basis, in short seminars.
- Formal training in relevant disciplines should be provided whenever possible, preferably through contacts with experts from these disciplines and collaborative research.

Can such conditions be met in the near future? Let us act and see!

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