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Book Review: Interpreting in the Zone

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Interpreters at work are as intriguing as acrobats or stunt performers. It seems impossible to listen and sign or speak at the same time, yet that's what the interpreter does. Many researchers have attempted to open up the black-box of the interpreter with the aim of understanding how interpreters do what they do. Seasoned teacher, researcher, and interpreter, Jack Hoza's latest book is a result of his desire to explore the processes behind interpreting, or in his own words "to understand the thinking processes of a variety of interpreters when they engage in interpretation, interact with participants and make professional and ethical decisions".

The aim and scope of the book is to explore the cognitive processes interpreters use to construct meaning and support decision making when interpreting, and also how the interpreter mind functions when "in the zone"—the "zone" being a concept close to flow, and which Hoza describes as the ideal mental state when interpreting. With the book Hoza also wants to share practical ideas for how interpreters can handle the processes and provide a better understanding of how to develop interpreting abilities and skills, as well as of how interpreters can become effective and caring practitioners. With the book the author also wants to provide a glimpse into the mind of interpreters and show the mental processes of interpreting and the expertise needed for successful interpreting. The target audience is people who want insight into how interpreters work in the zone, and how to manage their interpreting processes to achieve and maintain this state.

The book is built around the results of two studies (generously shared at the end of the book), one based on a questionnaire and the other on interviews. The studies explore interpreters' understanding and application of models of cognitive processes. The book consists of nine chapters, each giving background to different aspects of interpreting and reporting on the studies linked to the aspect in focus. Hoza reviews conscious and unconscious processes, models of interpreting, the flow theory, novice-expert paradigm, bilingualism, and different aspects of the working environment.

Hoza covers much more than just cognitive processes in interpreting. In the first chapter, Hoza outlines the main theoretical basis for the book, Kahneman's and Tversky's theories on decision making, intuition, and conscious reasoning (see e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1983), which he also links to studies in the cognitive paradigm in interpreting (e.g., Napier, 2016). He also introduces the two studies that form the foundation of the book: In the survey study, an online questionnaire was offered nationally in the U.S. to certified ASL–English interpreters; Two hundred twenty-three interpreters responded, three of them deaf interpreters, giving it a response rate of 29 %. The interview study comprised 12 interpreters with different profiles (novice, experienced and user-selected). These interpreters were filmed when they interpreted, and then interviewed about both their performance in the recorded interview and their ordinary interpreting work. Hoza also reports in Chapter 1 on the responses from the two studies on conscious preparation for a task. (The reviewer would like to stress that in terms of methods in interpreting studies, questionnaires and interviews are established research instruments in interpreting studies. Claims that can be made using these types of instruments are related to the participants values, opinions, and ideas about certain concepts. Other questionnaires can also be used to establish how often e.g. a certain situation occurs, or map facts such as age, gender, level of education and so forth.)

Chapter 2 is devoted to different models of interpreting, which Hoza divides into four: cognitive process/sociolinguistic models, discourse analysis, practice profession schema, and interactional sociolinguistics. Hoza also reports on the survey responses related to how interpreters conceptualize their cognitive processes while interpreting. The survey asked two questions regarding process: (a) Briefly describe what cognitive (mental) process you undergo when you are doing live interpretation (feel free to reference models or theories if you feel they pertain); and (b) What models or theories of interpretation do you tend to use to think about—or discuss—your interpreting work? One hundred and ten and one hundred and twenty interpreters answered these two questions respectively Responses were evenly distributed among three of the four models; interactional sociolinguistics was the least-mentioned approach. (As a reviewer, I find that adding a few lines on cognitive processes are appropriate here: Cognitive processes are based on knowledge, skills and experiences. They are combined acts in the brain needed to preform different tasks (Groome, 2010). Cognitive processes are often acquired at some point, although they may be automatized. New knowledge may be created from them. The cognitive field of interpreting research involves studies of working memory (e.g., Christoffels, de Groot, & Kroll, 2006; Liu 2001), the interpreter's brain (e.g. Hervais-Adelman, Moser-Mercer, & Golestani, 2011), processing time (e.g., Barik, 1973; Cokely, 1992; Siple 1993), intonation (e.g., Cecot, 2001; Williams, 1995), and cognitive load, just to mention a few. Many models have come out of this type of research. I argue that a questionnaire is an odd way of approaching cognitive processes.

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First, to think about or discuss models or theories, the respondents would have to have been trained in using that type of meta-language. Furthermore, in retrospective studies on processes, Ericsson and Simon (1993) conclude that participants can only remember and verbalize 2 to 10 seconds of a task. It is therefore surprising that participants would be comfortable discussing the mental processes they typically undergo when interpreting, provided they even know what these processes are. The answers most likely tell us something about the respondents' knowledge and perception of cognitive processes, but not about the cognitive processes actually in use during interpreting.)

In Chapter 3, Hoza outlines Csikszentmihalyi's (2008) flow theory and delineates it from his own use of "in the zone". Where Csikszentmihalyi's definition of in-flow can pertain to almost any aspect of life, Hoza uses "in the zone" as a special flow sensation connected only to highly challenging, high-performance contexts. In order to investigate in-the-zone experiences among interpreters, Hoza asks how they know that an interpretation is successful. One hundred and twenty-two interpreters (i.e. a little over half of the total number of respondents) answer this question, and an overwhelming majority them said they rely on external cues only (such as reactions from the parties of the interpreted event). (On a more philosophical note, an interpreter can presumably feel flow without delivering an interpretation considered successful by the users.)

The novice–expert paradigm (cf. Ericsson, 2000) is dealt with in Chapter 4. The different stages of expertise are applied to Hoza's consciousness paradigm, which is an illustration of how interpreting flows in a continuum from unconscious and unmonitored utterances to highly conscious and highly monitored ones. Hoza hypothesizes that the interpreter's effort is higher or lower depending on where the utterance is found on the continuum; and he describes the highest levels of expertise as a reflective competence moving along the continuum. In order to investigate expertise in his study, Hoza asked the interpreters what they considered to be the two main differences between how a seasoned interpreter and a newer interpreter undergo the mental interpreting process–or other aspects of their interpreting work. Responses (n=98) were divided into three types: those related to confidence; those related to experiences and world experiences; and those related to language fluency, accuracy, collegiality and professionalism. (In my opinion, answers seem to relate more to aspects of the interpreting work other than the mental interpreting process, however, but this is not surprising considering the difficulty of verbalizing one's own cognitive processes.) Hoza boldly concludes the chapter stating that true expertise is the goal of all conscientious interpreters.

Chapter 5 is devoted to a discussion on how to make changes in one's interpreting practice, based on what Hoza calls "aha! moments" and on Dweck's work on praise of effort versus ability (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Hoza states that "interpreters have more aha! moments when they are in the zone, and habits that support the interpreting process require less cognitive load" (p. 92). (Yet, this reviewer notes that the interpreters in the study report on aha! moments when they are not interpreting, but rather when they are watching other interpreters work or attending professional conferences or classes—which does not correlate to the assumption that they have more aha! moments in the zone.) In terms of changing habits, the interpreters mention changes related to both skill enhancement and habits to improve monitoring of the process. The chapter also discusses interesting and relevant tips for professional development.

Bilingualism is the topic of Chapter 6. Solid knowledge of working languages improves any interpreter's work; because sign language is learned at a mature age by many sign language interpreters, fluency in sign language is often an area where there is room for skill enhancement, for which Hoza provides suggestions. The chapter also deals with what Hoza labels "the community approach versus the mainstream approach" to interpreting. He describes the mainstream approach as focusing on the message and being neutral, while the community approach focuses on a natural, cohesive and comprehensible approach. (This reviewer is not a sign-language interpreting scholar and will therefore not discuss the two approaches, although the division seems more experience based than evidence based.) In his use of a typology and terminology of bilingualism, Hoza makes, in this reviewer's opinion) some unfortunate choices. He uses the term "semi-lingual, which was a much-debated term among bilingual scholars when it emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s (Hansegård, 1968). Many scholars claimed that the term completely disregards the complexity of bilingualism, and stems from a view of language competence only from a monolingual perspective; it has no empirical support in research in bilingualism. The definition of what Hoza calls a "complete language" is similarly debated. An individual can have different levels of proficiency in different languages, and environmental and social factors impact language proficiency (Baker, 2001). It is this reviewer's understanding that the term "semi-lingual" still lives in the research community of sign language and Deaf studies, signifying that deaf students do not get the possibility (in the mainstream classroom) to properly develop neither their sign language nor reading and writing skills in the country's majority language (Andrews, 2006). This is, of course, unconscionable, but does not make the term more acceptable.

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In Chapter 7, Hoza continues to discuss in-the-zone interpreting: what pushes interpreters out of the zone and how they get back into the zone. Questionnaire respondents (n=116) reported that their interpreting did not work because of problems with external disruptive factors, understanding of the topic, and personal factors (fatigue, nervousness, etc.). Respondents (n=199) listed ways to get the interpreting "working" again, such as refocusing, pausing and changing interpreting mode. The tips in the chapter can help guide interpreters to get back on track when an interpretation is disrupted.

Attitudes and interpreters' positionality in the sign language and deaf context are the topics of Chapter 8. Hoza stresses the importance of the interpreters' enculturation to the deaf community as well as attitude toward deaf people and sensitivity on issues of culture and power. Issues which also links back to the section of team interpreting with deaf and hearing interpreters. Hoza makes the important note here that being a good interpreter is not just about language skills and techniques, but also about being a "good" interpreter.

In the book's closing chapter, Hoza discusses ethical issues, deliberate practice and mentorship. Ethics is an ever-present important issue for any interpreter, and Hoza underscores that interpreters must get beyond the grey zones of the professional guidelines. He suggests that interpreters make three types of decisions regarding an encounter: personal, professional and ethical, and claims that whether a decision involves an ethical dimension can be judged by the possible dilemmas of a decision. I believe that the framework of discretionary power (Dworkin, 1978), used in the sociology of professions, can apply here: Discretionary power, also referred to as the "doughnut hole", is the empty space between the actual case a civil servant (for example) has to decide on, and the professional rules, ethical guidelines or law that the civil servant has to abide by when evaluating the case. The rules have to be followed, but every case also requires an individual decision. Just as the civil worker does, the interpreter has an empty space where situations need to be assessed and decisions made. The question is, at least for this reviewer, whether one can ever completely leave morals and ethics aside.

Hoza has written an entertaining, accessible book, with his long experience as interpreter and trainer as a solid base. The major weakness of the book is the flawed methodological use in the studies, and as a consequence, the conclusions that come from the studies. Cognitive processes are elusive and often veiled for the observer. One can make assumptions based on different hypotheses, and one can test certain assumptions. A questionnaire may gather information on how the responders understand or perceive cognitive processes, but it cannot provide a window into those processes; to the idea that one can draw conclusions on cognitive processes based on a questionnaire is faulty. Responses are still interesting, but from the perspective of how interpreters perceive how their mind works. It would have been helpful if the author had described how the questionnaire was developed. It is also unfortunate that many questions were only answered by half of the respondents.

If Hoza's main aim is to write a book for, as he says in the opening chapter, readers who want to learn how interpreters understand their work, then he has succeeded. However, if he intended to explore the cognitive processes interpreters use to construct meaning and support decision-making when interpreting, and also how the interpreter brain functions when "in the zone", he has simply not used the right means to do this, and the conclusions he draws from the material pertaining to this aim are unfounded.

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