



Intercultural communication in interpreting: power and choices

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BOOK REVIEW

Intercultural communication in interpreting: power and choices, by Jinhyun Cho, London and New York, Routledge, 2022, pp. xii+151, £130.00/\$170.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-13861-059-0; £34.99/\$46.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-13861-061-3

The myth of interpreters' invisibility and neutrality is still deeply rooted in the minds of many stakeholders, and the so-called 'conduit metaphor' can be easily found in codes of ethics that regulate the interpreting profession. However, scholarship has exploded the myth: by looking into real-life interpreter-mediated situations, researchers have found clear evidence of the visible and active role that interpreters can play. This has been especially investigated in terms of its linguistic and interactional manifestations, with the identification of non-translations, additions, expansions, code-switching and translanguaging – along with moves to coordinate participation in the interaction (by managing turn-taking through nonverbal cues, for example). Jinhyun Cho's work here aptly complements this research effort and provides valuable insight into the ways interpreters deal with critical situations that may arise in a range of contexts, from business to medical settings, from schools to courtrooms. All of those settings feature a number of structural constraints, which involve individuals' cultural background, local practices, and a more or less marked imbalance in power relations between service providers and users. Interpreters' choices (not just linguistic ones) become all the more crucial, therefore, for the successful attainment of participants' communicative goals.

Based on semi-structured interviews with 50 interpreters in Australia and 5 (business) interpreters in Korea, this book takes the reader into the heart of the communicative challenges faced by the informants, while also shedding light on the relevant causes and solutions. The target population covers 23 language combinations and all interpreters had English as one of their working languages. An attempt was made to have more than one informant per language combination and, although the results cannot be generalised, exploring the experiences of this diverse group was certainly worthwhile – not least to present stories that so many professionals in the field had never been able to tell before.

The book comprises six chapters, each with its own list of references. Apart from the first and the last, they include 'reflection activities' to stimulate further discussion on the examples provided, and in relation to dilemmas arising in various situations where interpreters had to make decisions.

Chapter 1 outlines the main concepts underpinning the study as a whole from a Bourdieusian and sociological perspective: interpreting as a professional activity, interpreters' roles and agency, and the importance of context and its structural constraints with respect to language and culture. Since the volume is also aimed at readers unfamiliar with interpreting, this section is necessarily quite basic, although at times it seems to oversimplify complex notions – as in defining interpreting as relating to spoken words (with no reference to sign language, although sign-language interpreting is mentioned in Chapter 4) or in identifying diplomatic interpreters as conference interpreters (when they work in a booth). A direct question to the reader ('What would you do, if you were the interpreter?', 8) is meant as a reflection-trigger with respect to cases illustrated through appropriate excerpts. Beyond the concepts mentioned above, the last part of Chapter 1 steers towards methodological decisions. In particular, the analytical prism of 'small cultures' (10) is introduced to identify the various communities of practice (or diacultures) discussed in the following chapters, which focus on specific settings where interpreting services are provided within 'a field of power relations, in which individual choices are often limited' (8). Details about the dataset and the informants are also provided here, with a final appendix listing all the 55 informants in alphabetical order (by

pseudonym), along with their gender and working language other than English. For the more research-minded, grouping the informants by working language and specifying the reference market would have more fully described the population's composition. More information about the sampling procedure and the design of the semi-structured interviews would also have been welcome.

Chapter 2 looks at business interpreting, with a particular focus on issues arising from gendered power hierarchies that (female) interpreters may find themselves to deal with – for instance, the use of sexist language, off-topic statements, and 'military style' in Korean men's communication. Another issue concerns the alleged and flaunted knowledge of English by those who actually lack any command of it. (This situation is discussed with reference to Japanese university professors in Australia.) Although most informants involved in this part of the study were from South Korea, where freelance or in-house business interpreters are far more common than community interpreters, many observations are likely to resonate in the experience of business interpreters from other countries where corporate executive positions are typically dominated by men. Some telling examples from respondents' stories are about interpreting jokes and side comments that may be perceived as inappropriate in the target culture. While it is understandable that interpreters may feel the need not to interpret (or to interpret with a smile) certain jokes in order to soften potentially irreverent, offensive or irrelevant items, the question remains whether impolite, rude business people should 'sound better' than they really are. How is it possible to distinguish unintentional culture bumps (due to lack of knowledge) from mere rudeness, lack of tact, or on-purpose rambling? Pre-emptive strategies may be employed by interpreters in order to inform clients of the potential damage their comments, jokes or irrelevant communication may cause. In other cases, interpreters may deliberately adjust the target speech, thus exerting 'micro-interactional power' (31).


The next chapters are about community interpreting, starting with medical interpreting in Chapter 3. After a critical overview of multicultural society in Australia and a discussion of the importance of migrants' backgrounds, the analysis addresses the institutional and relational constraints likely to be found in health-care communication. Three situations are illustrated with respect to elderly migrants' isolation and its impact on doctor-patient communication. The volubility and rambling of some patients may be taken as possible signs of dementia. Challenges of in-group membership in approaching mental-health issues may be complicated because of fears of information leakage and community gossip. Ways to communicate bad news (such as negative diagnoses) constitute a third possible scenario. All of these situations – combined with institutional constraints (like regulations governing private communication with patients, for example) – can trigger diverse reactions from community interpreters: they can find themselves in the position of serving both the institution and the patient (and may themselves belong to the patient's community). In addition to explaining their role and confidentiality rules to patients, interpreters' agency can also be exerted to make service providers more aware of possible intercultural faultlines.

The fourth chapter deals with school interpreting, particularly in teacher-parent communication, with a focus on the East Asian migrant population in Australia and the influence of cultural stereotypes relating to 'tiger' parents. None of the respondents in the study had extensive experience as (spoken- language) interpreters in school settings, something mirrored in the limited literature available, which is largely focused on child language brokering. Despite these limitations, the chapter offers an interesting snapshot of communicative dynamics that are still shaped by structural-cultural factors and yet give interpreters greater opportunities to step in as cultural brokers. They can help to manage situations resulting from a perceived lack (or excess) of racial and linguistic legitimacy associated with Eurocentrism in Australian educational culture and a sense of inferiority that is deeply rooted in some migrant communities.

Chapter 5, about legal interpreting (in courtrooms and asylum screening interviews), is almost twice as long as the other chapters. Interpreter-mediated legal communication has been the subject of extensive research in many parts of the world, and Australia is no exception. This chapter helps to

pinpoint the critical influence of monolingual and monocultural biases on interpreter-mediated communication, with specific attention to matters of performance and credibility. An informative overview of the major issues is provided – including ethnocentricity, homogeneity of court officials’ background, insufficient regard to multiculturalism, foreign-accented English, issues of stakeholders’ credibility and English competence, lack of familiarity with minority-language varieties, and ‘the impact of contextual and power relations in the specific space of courtrooms on response patterns’ (111). Most interestingly, Cho reports on the coping tactics of those informants who take a proactive approach: using body language, employing fillers to deal with different storytelling styles, asking the court for permission to verify that a question has been understood correctly, and providing cultural advice, especially to those with decisional power.

In the final chapter, the author highlights the inextricable links connecting power and choices in interpreting with intercultural communication and in field conditions. Considering the self-contained nature of the chapters, the book seems to be designed for work in programmes of interpreting education, but it could well be adopted in intercultural training modules for business, medicine, education and law students, even outside Australia. Notwithstanding the intrinsic limitations of retrospective comments and self-reported accounts, the many voices that Cho was able to listen to can provide readers with far more than a glimpse of how communication works in settings where research access is often difficult, particularly when the spotlight is focused on sensitive situations involving power imbalances. While previous research had already discussed most of the issues arising in the types of interpreting presented in this book, those issues are treated collectively here, and this can stimulate debate about different strategies for solving intercultural communication problems and rebalancing power relations. As Cho emphasised, a shared effort is necessary, one that engages all the stakeholders – not just interpreters – and reframes the roles of interpreters. I hope that the thought-provoking reflections presented in this volume can prove a shortcut to achieving those goals.

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