

NORMS, CREATIVITY OR SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS? QUESTIONING QUALITY IN COMMUNITY INTERPRETING IN PUBLIC SERVICES

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Abstract

The evolution of *Translation and Interpreting Studies* as scholarly disciplines in the last decades shows a series of shifts from micro to macro approaches, from text to context, and from language to society. These shifts are also accompanied by the development or reinforcement of what could be considered new areas of study such as *Translation and Interpreting in Public Services (TIPS)*, *Sign Language Interpreting*, *Remote Interpreting* or *Interpreting in Conflict*. This paper concentrates on TIPS. The growing interest in TIPS is undoubtedly linked to the migration phenomenon; and the intervention of intermediaries who make communication possible is generally recognised. Despite this fact, the controversy regarding the role(s) these intermediaries perform appears to be a barrier to academic and institutional acceptance and recognition. Following the influence of Bourdieu's social theory, it is my intention to apply it to TIPS in an attempt to explain the performance of these 'visible' interpreters.

Keywords: *Translating and Interpreting in Public Services (TIPS)*, *sociology*, *Bourdieu*, *migration*, *minority languages and cultures*

1. Introduction: Bourdieu and the construction of a social space

During the last decades, the evolution of *Translation and Interpreting Studies* as scholarly disciplines show a series of shifts from micro to macro approaches, from text to context, and from language to society. These shifts are also accompanied by the development or reinforcement of what could be considered new areas of study such as *Translation and Interpreting in Public Services* (or *Community Interpreting and Translation*), *Sign Language Interpreting*, *Remote Interpreting* or *Interpreting in Conflict*, *Torture* or *Gender Violence*. Whichever way one looks at it, there seems to be a growing interdisciplinary interest between translation studies and sociology. This interest relates, among other things, to the role of the translator and

translation in the development of a society and the interplay between the constraints that society places on the translator and translation praxis, on the one hand, and the activism and resistance of the translation agency, on the other. Topics such as the role of interpreting and its agents in our societies, the socio-political conditions under which interpreting takes place, vacuums in interpreting practice and their social consequences, models to account for the social transcendence of interpreting or initiatives to enhance responsible practice, the professional status of interpreters, research, or training are particularly welcome in international conferences (See <http://www2.tolk.su.se/konfindx.html>) as well as in recent publications.

As Julie Boéri and Sofía García-Beyaert pointed out in the call for papers for IATIS Conference 2012, the recognition of interpreting as a situated practice has shifted the focus of research from interpreters' detachment to allegiances, from deontology to ethics, from training skilled practitioners to educating socially aware professionals.

As an example of the embeddedness of interpreters in the social fabric, this paper aims to bring together critical reflections and research work on the relationships between interpreting and society, with a particular emphasis on the issue of the role of the interpreter in the specific field of Community Interpreting and under a specific umbrella: Bourdieu's social theory.

Given the range of approaches to defining the nature and scope of Translation and Interpreting in Public Services (TIPS), I will limit my discussion to the perspective adopted in the present study: TIPS is a specific area within the field of Translation Studies dedicated to the study of the communication that occurs in public service settings between service providers and clients. These clients are typically members of a minority group whose unfamiliarity extends beyond mere language, to the system of values, practices and representations of the host society (cf. Valero Garcés y Mancho 2002: 15-23).

In what follows, I will focus on the social importance of TIPS when practiced in multicultural societies. It is in such contexts that Bourdieu's key concepts of *field* and *habitus* provide an ideal framework within which to theorize about this area. I will begin with a brief explanation of Bourdieu's theories, also defining the basic concepts mentioned above.

Bourdieu (1980, 88) considers society to be a sport, a social game with its own system of rules, where the players are familiar with the basic rules which enable their participation. Entering into the game therefore entails having a feel for the game, this being one of the privileges of having been born a participant. It is this privilege that enables us to employ, more or less unconsciously, the practices inherent to the rules of this game. These practices are used to construct the social space, which is structured upon its own system of values.

The mechanism of social organization is to be understood through two key concepts: *field* and *habitus*. *Fields* are autonomous spheres, each with their own rules and feel for the game. Different modes of domination are defined for each *field* and in relation to other *fields*. The agents in these *fields* have the *habitus* or possess acquired dispositions which generate practices and representations that enable them to play in the different social *fields*. In this way, the *habitus* contribute to the reproduction and transformation of the social structure. Each *field* comprises the action of three agents:

1. The existence of a common capital (knowledge, abilities, power, etc.);
2. The struggle to appropriate this capital;
3. A hierarchy formed between those who hold the capital and those who aspire to do so.

Belonging to a *field* means that one is familiar with the rules of the game and is endowed with *habitus*, which implies knowledge and recognition of the laws which are intrinsic to this game, and the objectives thereof. But: what happens when a player doesn't know how to play?

Returning to the subject of TIPS, this question is fundamental if we are to describe the role of the translator/interpreter (T/I) as someone who should not only be familiar with the rules of the social game, but who will also make sure that the players act according to these rules. It is the T/I that creates the *illusio* or illusion of transparency (or of a monolingual context), which involves its own practices and representations.

From this perspective, the main aim of TIPS is to produce a text in line with the environment, the recipient of the communication, and the host culture- and necessarily reproduce the original message. In the following pages I will attempt to explain this assertion which enables us to delve more deeply into a sociological theory of TIPS.

2. An initial approach to the development of a sociological theory of TIPS.

An initial approach to the development of a sociological theory of TIPS will take us to determine the type of game that lies behind certain actions, establish who the players are, and the space in which they are playing (*field*). Once all of these parameters are established, we will have to infer, based on the T/I's actions, the type of game being played and finally, secure the T/I's recognition by other *fields*.

Starting from the fact that the ultimate goal of TIPS is to enable real and effective communication between participants with pronounced disadvantages (economic, social, educational), and that the agents that make up the TIPS communication triangle (public service clients, translators and

interpreters, and service providers) belong to specific fields and possess a different *habitus*, various questions arise: how is the communication organized? Will the T/I have to move between different *fields*? Is this possible? Will a context-specific translation or interpretation therefore be more appropriate than a literal translation or interpretation in a specific *field*?

Previous studies based on the application of Bourdieusian theories to translation studies (Gouanvic, 81-82) or to specific areas or perspectives on translation (Simeoni 1998, Heilbron and Sapiro 2002, Inghilleri 2003, 2005) provide some answers, which I shall describe below.

Gouanvic (*ibid.*) emphasizes that the objectives of translation in general, understood in the practical sense, are those of the target *fields* and that the translator's *habitus* would be the product of the union of two languages and cultures. In other words, the T/I's bilingualism and biculturalism, different in each case, would make up his or her *habitus* because, as Gouanvic points out, translation is not a homogenous field.

From this perspective, the main conclusion is that the aim of TIPS is to transmit information in a way which is easy to grasp for the target community, whether it consists of immigrants (a disadvantaged minority group) or service providers (a group that holds the power associated with possessing information or wealth or having the ability to distribute it, and to ignore some other aspects of its clients – e.g. culture). All in all, it comes down to seeking an even playing *field*, because, according to Gouanvic,(90) “translation is (thus) highly influenced by the power relationship between the source *field* and the target *field* [...]”.

Along these same lines, Crozier and Freidberg (20) explain that collective action operates on the principle of integrating the social actors, which is achieved in two different ways:

- i) by force
- ii) through negotiation.

These are forms of controlling and balancing the power relations that join (or separate) these players as they work towards a common objective, which is conditioned by their individual objectives.

Societal influence on the use of language does not go unnoticed by the French sociologist. For Bourdieu, language, in the sense of distinct linguistic capital, is primarily associated with the formal characteristics of languages (phonological, lexical, and stylistic variation), but also with the varieties of use authorized for a particular language.

The act of translating and interpreting is never a mere textual transfer (oral or written), but is instead consciously or unconsciously influenced by the production and reproduction of cultural meanings.

The translators and interpreters, like all social agents, are somehow placed within the production process. (1988, 33)

Such statements serve to refute or move away from the traditional idea of the T/I remaining passive and subordinate to the norms of the profession (norms as to what is acceptable and appropriate). T/I must not be subjected to rigid standards but instead, their work should be viewed within the overall context in which they are performed. This places translating and interpreting in a constant push and pull, or as Bourdieu would say: adherence to and divergence from the norms can happen at any place and time, either at the uppermost or macrostructural level, or at the local level or in any interaction between the two.

Inghilleri (2003, 252) applies this Bourdieusian idea to her study of interviews to asylum/refugee seekers. Drawing on information from other writers (Anker 1991, Barsky 1996, Blommaert and Maryns 2001), she points out that the main objective for all the participants involved, including the translators and interpreters, is to produce meanings which are acceptable to the host culture/environment. This implies that the parties (police, judge, attorney, asylum seeker, interpreter) must adapt their participation to the political, cultural and linguistic reality of the specific context (asylum office), which is monolingual, even though the reality of the situation implies that this asylum process should be multilingual.

In this respect, the research done by Anker (252-264) provides a good example. Anker analyzes United States asylum interviews in which the participants are a judge, an attorney (English-Spanish bilingual), an asylum seeker, and an interpreter. She studies the behavior of two types of interpreters: the professional certified interpreter and the freelance interpreter, the latter of which has received no specific training and is accustomed to performing other tasks apart from interpreting (translating, providing cultural information, assisting etc.). During one of the interviews, the freelance interpreter translated "failure" literally as "fracaso" in Spanish and the applicant's attorney (a bilingual) interrupted, saying that the correct translation in that context would be in Spanish "daño físico" ("physical damage"). Further along, the interpreter was asked about the rendering and said that the attorney's translation was the correct option. However, he had gone by the work method known as the "conduit model" or literal interpretation, which had led him to supply a literal answer without giving thought to the context or trying to adapt his interpretation. The same thing occurred in the case of the interpreter's translation of the Spanish word "cuartel" as "the police station or the barracks," which according to the attorney, signified "army barracks". This was important given that the

attorney wished to specify the type of institution to the court in order to strengthen the request for asylum and avoid doubts or other interpretations.

Inghilleri's study (2003, 258) also furnishes relevant information regarding the interpreter's role. This information serves to support the Bourdieusian theories in the sense that being aware of the practices and representations of each of the agents in the game would help the interpreter to negotiate meanings when making decisions as to what the applicant "says" and what he/she "wants to say", or what he/she "should say".

This situation is repeated in other everyday situations within TIPS settings, e.g. medical appointments, parents-teacher meetings, or police interrogations of immigrant detainees, and translators and interpreters must be familiar with the different types of discourse (legal, medical, etc.) that are used in such situations. They need to know how to navigate in a given *field* and make these strategies and conventions part of their *habitus* so that they may accurately reproduce the words of speakers in positions of authority (doctors, judges, teachers, etc.).

In such cases, multiple questions arise:

What happens when the T/I's *habitus* and *capital* are more closely related to those of one participant in the exchange than to the *habitus* and *capital* of the other?

Or when both participants belong to different *fields* and have different *habitus* and *capital*?

Or when, in terms of *habitus* and *capital*, the T/I is more closely related to the immigrant than to the government official?

Or to the defender rather than with the accuser?

Or to the patient instead of to the doctor?

Or to the immigrant instead of the police officer?

Will the T/I's affiliation with a certain minority group influence his/her vision and subsequent translation of the exchange?

Will all T/Is perform their role in the same manner?

Will their participation in the game change if they share the same country and culture with the client or if they do not?

Will the T/I be influenced by his or her knowledge or view of reality?

These and many other questions raised by authors such as Vidal (2005: 275) find some answers in the recent research by Angelelli (2003), Valero Garcés y Martín (2008), Garre (1999), Feldman (2000), or Brunette (2003), as well as in the increasingly abundant literature on the role of the T/I, with many examples that question the literal translation of the message and move towards a more sociological approach:

Swabey and Gajewski (69) conclude their study on the role of the sign language interpreter as follows:

For many years, interpreters have too often hidden behind the cloak of neutrality, avoiding the realization that taking no action can be as harmful as an inappropriate action. It will only be possible to develop best practices related to role when interpreters recognize and accept responsibility for the power they have as participants and co-constructors of meaning in an interpreted interactive event.

Jacobsen (224), following up on previous studies of how court interpreters actually behave in the courtroom and having studied Danish court interpreters herself, argues that the pretence of the court interpreter's invisibility cannot be supported.

In her study on the work of court interpreters in Venezuela, Vilela Biasi (2003) also urges interpreters to have a more active role in situations where training programs and regulatory frameworks do not exist, as is often the case in TIPS in many countries.

Hale (100-121) analyses each of five most current roles prescribed or adopted by interpreters in Court Interpreting. These are:

- advocate for the minority language speaker;
- advocate for the institution or the service provider;
- a gatekeeper's role;
- a facilitator of communication;
- a faithful renderer of other people's utterances.

Hale (*ibid.*) suggests that the most appropriate role for court interpreters is the last one, i.e. that of a faithful renderer of other people's utterances. Still, she also points out that "taking on this role, however, does not mean interpreters must act as mindless machines. It means attempting to be as accurate as possible within human limitations", and she adds that "working conditions, including the way they are treated by other participants and the way those participants express themselves, will also affect performance".

Healthcare interpreting has also been the focus of various studies which have shed light on the complex role of the interpreters (Angelelli 2001, 2003, 2004, Bolden 2000, Davidson 2001, Metzger 1999, Valero-Garcés 2008). These studies have shown interpreters to be essential partners, co-constructors to the interaction, repairing and facilitating the talk, challenging the notion of neutrality. As Angelelli (150) remarks:

These scholars underscore the fact that interpreting does not happen in a social vacuum and the importance of describing the role of interpreters in the social context where the interaction is embedded.

Just as in the case of Bourdieu's theories, these authors question the universality and objectivity of various approaches to TIPS in different theories.

Bourdieu's sociological theory is an outstanding contribution in this direction. From this perspective, the research shows the wide range of strategies used to compensate for the cultural and/or linguistic asymmetries between the host language/culture and those of the country of origin. It also answers questions regarding decision making, potential conflicts that can arise from the participants' different objectives (*skopos*) in the interpreting or translating processes, or the inter- and intra-cultural nature of interpreting. Here, the quality of the translation or interpretation or the T/I's good or bad performance is not perceived to be a problem. Instead, they are deemed as part of the necessary decision making process in the context of a specific *field*, with its corresponding *habitus* and *capital*. It should not be forgotten that the T/I usually works in monolingual/monocultural *fields* and must be capable of creating an *illusion* of transparency with the decisions he or she makes.

These decisions may or may not lead to negotiation between the parties (asking for something to be repeated, for the person to speak more slowly, for a certain concept to be explained etc.). The T/I can also avoid this negotiating process and simply assume that he or she is there to transmit the message and create the impression, to the court during a trial for example, that the communication is flowing smoothly. A literal translation, on the other hand, can lead to more difficulties, resulting in a too formal, or strange account, or one that reminds of, or makes the court aware of, the presence of the "other" – with his/her different language and culture.

In this scenario the T/I will cease to be "invisible" and will instead become the link that sustains the monolingual context of these encounters in which there is no place for "the other", who is made visible by the T/I. Inghilleri (2003) even claims that the political and legal *fields* and their corresponding *habitus* are at times more influential than the T/I's decisions when performing in certain contexts.

This type of situation can occur in any kind of setting.

3. Research about the interpreter's role(s) and behaviour. A case study

In a study of the different reactions of interpreters performing in similar situations, different behaviours were observed when it came to deciding on how much to intervene or alter the message, as illustrated in the examples below. These have been taken from a project conducted in the central area of Spain in 2007. Data were obtained through a questionnaire distributed to 55 experienced interpreters. The questionnaire included the description of a situation in context (Case) and two questions, one related to the interpreting

model (conduit or advocacy) the I/T will follow; and the other one related to the sort of emotions and reactions a T/I will experience for the specific situation. (See Valero Garcés 2008, 231-242).

CASE 1: Interpreter and therapist

Situation:

An interpreter remarks:

“I was born in X and I lived there until I was 21. I know my culture very well. I feel very close to my people. It is a nation which for years has been oppressed, tortured and subjugated. I know exactly what it means when a woman from X says that “they” have raped her. My hair stands on end and I get goosebumps. I know that there are conspiracies against the town of X and the lies that “they” tell women and how “they” destroy them. For years, our town has been living with a war syndrome. Women have been beaten down psychologically. A therapist that isn’t from X can’t understand these people. He/she hasn’t been through the same things and he/she can’t understand how the people feel and what they go through. Unfortunately, I am in the wrong profession. Although I do believe that, having worked as an interpreter for so long, I am at times in a position to be a better therapist than the real therapists”.

Question: 1. Do you agree with these comments? What model of behavior would you choose? (Graph 1)

Answers: Impartiality / literal translation: 15

Advocacy / mediation: 37

The results indicate a strong inclination in favor of the advocacy model (71.1 %) as opposed to the impartiality model (28.8 %), which is in line (50 % - 26 cases) with the interpreter’s remarks: acting as a therapist.

Question 2. Which of the following emotions would you experience? (Graph 2) Write the options in order according to the level of intensity:

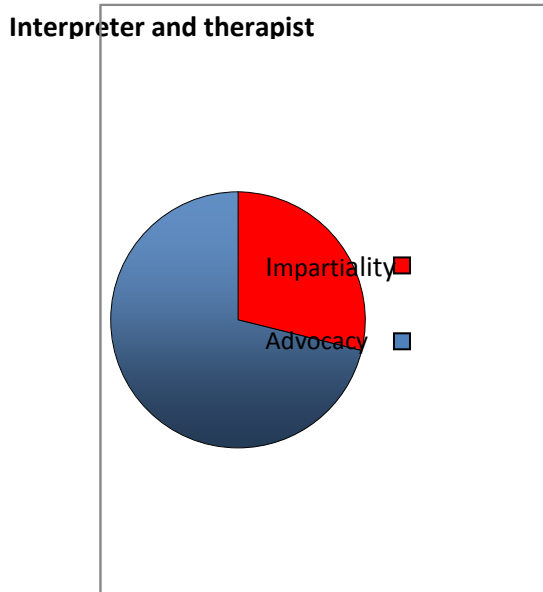
<i>Empathy</i>	<i>Need for training</i>	<i>Overestimation of role</i>	<i>Wrong profession</i>
16	7	12	5

The results indicate a high degree of empathy with the client (30.7%) and statements such as “do my little bit to right the wrongs” and “be a better therapist than the professionals because I know how it really is in the country” are frequent.

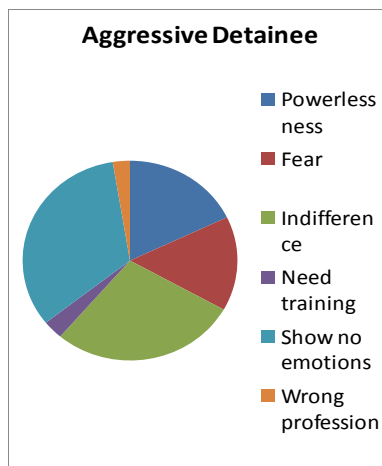
On the other hand, a significant percentage feels that interpreters overestimate their knowledge and role (23%) and perform another job – besides that of interpreter – for which they have not been prepared. 13.4% feel that they would need training, especially with regard to ethical aspects,

so as to be able to know how far they could take their intervention. 9.6% feel that they had chosen the wrong profession and that they are unable to perform their job successfully.

Graph 1. Which model of behavior would you choose?



Graph 2. Which emotions would you experience?



CASE 2. Aggressive Detainee

Situation:

Imagine that you must interpret for someone who has been brought in to the police station. You notice that this individual is very nervous and agitated. You feel a bit uncomfortable and you tell the police to be careful. After the questioning they escort the detainee to the van in order to take him in to prison. On the way to prison with the two police officers, in a van equipped with bars, the detainee manages to reach his hand through the bars and grab one of the police officers, take out a pocket knife, and inflict a mortal wound on him. The police officer dies. You must continue interpreting for this individual even after this event.

Question 1: How would you act? What model of behavior would you choose? (Graph 3)

Impartiality / literal translation: 38

Advocacy / mediation: 14

The results indicate that 73 % would appear impartial and would translate with diplomacy and concision, while only 26.9% would try to communicate their distrust or warn the provider of possible problems.

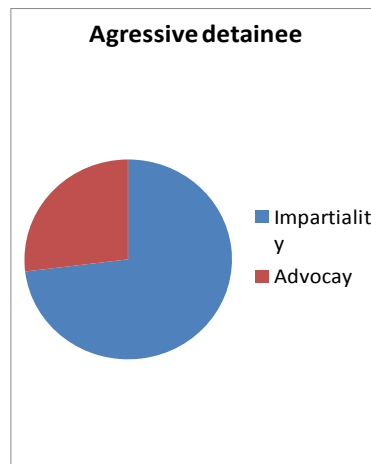
Question 2. Which of the following reactions would you experience? (Graph 4) Write the options in order according to the intensity of the reaction:

Emotions/reaction that you would experience

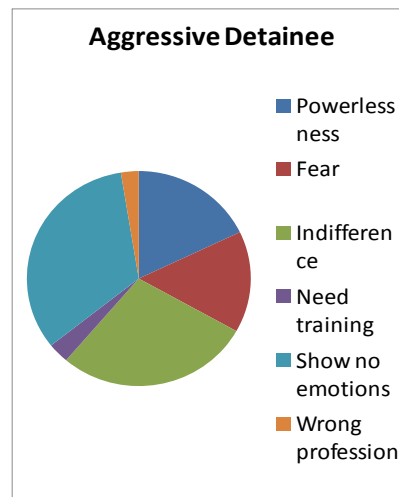
<i>Powerlessness</i>	<i>Fear</i>	<i>Indifference</i>	<i>Need training</i>	<i>Show no emotions</i>	<i>Wrong profession</i>
7	6	11	2	13	1

As for the interpreters' reactions, a rather high percentage (25 %) refers to the need for ethical and psychological training, so as to decide more easily on how to cope with such situations. The next reaction, which follows with a slightly inferior percentage (21.1%), is fearfulness, especially of any possible retaliation on the part of the suspect, which could lead the T/I to stick to bare bones translation on this second occasion. Insecurity (13.4%) and powerlessness (11.5 %) are other reactions to take into account.

Graph 3. Which model of behavior would you choose?



Graph 4. Which emotions would you experience?



4. Conclusions

To conclude, in spite of the limited data at our disposal, this research suggests once again that the interpreter always acts within the context of a specific *field*, in which there can be many different variables that make up his/her *habitus* and influence his work.

These variables can be interpreted in very different ways. Thus, to some practitioners and researchers, the answers to these situations may indicate that some I/T professionals consider they are disadvantaged because of differences in their educational, social, linguistic or cultural background; to others, these answers may indicate that an interpreter's lack of preparation may be a result of situational influences, of the demands of the hiring institution, the influence of the social environment or a personal choice based on their view of the intervention.

According to Bourdieu's theories, none of these decisions is erroneous or wrong; instead, they all represent the interpreter's necessary response within a specific *field* which operates according to the rules imposed by the interpreter and his/her *habitus*.

Finally, the growing acceptance of the idea that interpreting and translating in public services do not happen, as Angelelli (2003) points out, in a social vacuum, fits into a sociological theory of TIPS. From this perspective, every mediator's performance is seen as the necessary task of the I/T (not as a deviation). Acting within a particular social environment, the I/T must adhere to the social, political, institutional, cultural, and personal constraints that operate, at a particular time, in that environment.

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