Book Review


As globalisation and migration continue to reshape the world, there is a growing need for language-related services. Interpreters, as mediators between speakers of different languages, play a critical role in promoting intercultural communications. However, it is not only language barriers that interpreters are expected to address, but also gaps in the knowledge, beliefs and values that are rooted in the social norms of the two or more respective cultures. Encountering and resolving communicative challenges brought about by cultural differences is an integral part of an interpreter’s routine work. Jinhyun Cho’s volume *Intercultural Communication in Interpreting: Power and Choices* is a timely contribution to the discussion. Drawing on authentic, concrete narrative stories in a number of interpreting scenarios and illustrating the choices that interpreters make to compromise codified professional norms and actual practices, this book provides an insightful perspective on interpreting practice for both scholars who seek to understand interpreter-mediated intercultural communication and professionals who wish to reflect and act on their prior experience of communication breakdowns.

The book is comprised of six chapters that describe and analyse the responses of interpreters to context-specific challenges and dilemmas in various settings. Starting with an English-Bangla interpreter’s experience of conveying news of an unfavourable diagnosis to a patient from a cultural tradition that avoids truth-telling, Chapter 1 is an overview of the book, covering the research background and the theoretical and methodological orientations of the research. It first invites readers to understand interpreting as a typical case of intercultural communication that is often characterised by clashes between languages, cultures and power. A variety of interpreting types (e.g., community and non-community interpreting) and scenarios (e.g., business, educational,
legal and medical settings) are then introduced. The interpreting practice in this research is theoretically grounded in Bourdieu’s (1990) sociological concept of *habitus*, which views social norms and processes as a reflection of hierarchical power. In the meantime, the author adopts Holliday’s (1999) concept of “small cultures” as an interpretive framework to capture the cohesive behaviours of individuals in context-specific settings, which is theoretically well-fitted and avoids generalising towards broad cultural impressions. At the end of this chapter, the author supplies an account of the methodological considerations and data collection procedures of the research that are presented in the ensuing chapters. The research methods are well justified under the theoretical framework, although a detailed description relating to how the thematic data analysis was conducted is not included.

Each of the following four chapters addresses specific issues associated with interpreting-mediated intercultural communication, including gender-oriented power imbalance in business interpreting, communicative gaps between migrant patients and Anglo-Australian doctors, cultural differences in Asian and Australian educational philosophies, and monolingual stereotypes in legal and refugee application settings. By using concrete cases of communicative conflict and interpreter decision-making, the book presents how macro power hierarchies of various types across different intercultural contexts have an impact on interpreting behaviours, and how interpreters utilise their micro-individual power to deal with communicative issues and to mitigate intercultural conflicts.

Chapter 2 presents a critical discussion of interpreters’ decision-making in response to communicative clashes in business negotiations as a result of gender stereotypes and power hierarchy. The author first draws a distinction between corporate interpreters and freelance interpreters, and then focuses on the former type of interpreters who often assume an additional secretarial role to the clients as this is typically the case where young women work for men in higher and more powerful positions and where gendered expectations are involved. Each of the subsequent subsections introduces a situation in which interpreters are challenged by power-embedded intercultural tensions: 1) sexist jokes as ice-breakers, 2) off-topic communication styles and 3) male pride in English proficiency. In terms of the first tension, a range of strategies, such as asking the audience to laugh, adapting a message with a smile or offering cultural advice to the joke makers, are proposed by interpreters to keep the conversation going. For off-topic talks, interpreters usually rephrase or adapt messages to facilitate communication. Furthermore, in cases where male clients insist on speaking English, which often leads to inefficient communication,
interpreters would attend to male pride by not interfering with the interlocutors’ individual agendas.

This chapter provides a concrete account of effective coping strategies for interpreting, although the demonstrated cases are based predominantly in the context of Asian countries and understood from the perspective of Asian cultural gender stereotypes and expectations. Nonetheless, the gender-based approach is well-suited to analysing the use of translation strategies by interpreters, as well as their choice to agentively engage, or not, in power-oriented situations. In particular, the creativity and agency of female interpreters are highlighted as they try to achieve communicative success while being constrained by the status hierarchy between themselves and male clients. Interestingly, in a corpus-based study of gender differences in Dutch-English simultaneous interpreting, Magnifico and Defrancq (2017) found that female interpreters tended to use hedging strategies more frequently than male interpreters. Triangulating both qualitative and quantitative evidence, it would appear that the choices made by interpreters are indeed influenced by gender-based power relations, although the interpreting settings in the two studies differ.

Chapter 3 addresses interpreter agency in the medical setting. This section focuses particularly on the intercultural communication strategies that are employed by interpreters in relation to medical engagement between doctors and elderly migrant patients in Australia. The first case illustrates the dilemma when interpreters are regarded as sympathetic listeners by migrant patients who are socially and linguistically isolated, while their actions are confined by the doctor-patient hierarchy and professional code of conduct. The second case focuses on patients with mental illness who view interpreters as a potential source of information leakage and thus fear gossip in their ethnic community. The final case illustrates the difficulties involved in negotiating malign medical diagnoses between doctors and patients from cultures that reject the explicit verbalisation of bad news. These cases mirror the real-life challenges that interpreters frequently face in such situations.

In all three cases, interpreters are confronted with a dilemma: the need to adhere to the professional requirement to remain emotionally detached, while at the same time building rapport with vulnerable patients. Nonetheless, they develop helpful coping strategies, such as employing a personal style for rapport building, using body language to show empathy or offering modest cultural advice, to facilitate conversations. The author elaborates on these strategies, highlighting the micro-individual power that interpreters apply to reconcile cultural, contextual and power-oriented dilemmas, in an attempt to
achieve optimal communicative goals. The choices that interpreters make are subject to the complexities of medical negotiation, and the analyses are thus context-driven. Taken together, a comprehensive depiction of medical interpreting shaped by power dynamics and empowered by interpreter agency is highlighted to readers.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to issues concerning interpreting in the school context, with a particular focus on Asian migrants in Australia. The author first introduces the socio-cultural background of Asian-Australians who are othered by society, justifying their strong motivation to change their belittled social status through the educational achievements of their children, which is incompatible with the Australian way of learning. Under such circumstances, school interpreters, as described, constantly encounter different schooling expectations and values from migrant parents and schools. Cases of communicative conflict are depicted in the chapter, including 1) Asian parents’ emphasis on hard work and over-schooling, 2) expectational gaps between teachers and Asian parents in terms of parental involvement in education and 3) sensitivity to racial discrimination due to a sense of ethnic and linguistic inferiority. The author then discusses the different approaches that interpreters employ to achieve communicative success; these approaches involve offering cultural advice, rephrasing messages that are likely to be misunderstood, maintaining a distance between themselves and migrant clients, or representing misrepresented clients. This chapter concludes by reflecting on the criteria for successful interpreter mediation when the two sides have different dispositions and intentions. In this case in particular, the author appears to take a positive stand in regard to the individual agency of interpreters. The school context is indeed less confined by power hierarchy than is the case in medical or business settings, but the extent to which interpreters are allowed to exercise their agency and creativity has always led to divergent views. The question as to whether interpreters should be sympathetically dedicated or professionally detached remains open for discussion.

In Chapter 5 the author draws attention to court interpreting. It commences by considering the way in which legal expertise and status have an impact on communication norms, particularly in the case of individuals from a minority background and with limited proficiency of the mainstream language. The legal interpreting profession is conceptualised as unconcerned by legal professionals but trusted by minority court participants. Interpreters are expected to bridge the gap between the two ideologies held by the legal authority and minority individuals respectively, but in this case they are again entangled by the legal requirement to faithfully deliver messages while at the same time building rapport with minority clients who are subject to power dynamics,
which echoes the discussion of interpreter positionality as ‘in between’ or ‘within’ the two ideologies (Pöchhacker, 2006).

This chapter examines three dilemmas that are constantly faced by legal interpreters. The first is concerned with how the credibility of interpreters is assessed by court professionals. The latter tend to idealise interpreters as having flawless spoken English, and who are sometimes viewed as translation machines. The second dilemma is introduced in the case of interrogative yes-no questions, while the last scenario features the special case of interpreting for refugees and asylum seekers. In these cases, minority court participants tend to talk relentlessly, explaining reasons or reporting issues rather than responding to inquiries in a straightforward manner, which often arouses the suspicions of legal professionals. When it comes to evaluating the credibility of the accounts provided by refugee applicants, the decisions made by legal officials are often based on their cultural assumptions and judgements, while their expectations are often not reasonably met because of the refugee applicants’ incoherent and emotional manner of narrating. As legal interpreters are discouraged from intervening, they resort to clever strategies to address communicative problems, such as using body gestures or offering cultural advice authorised by the court.

As the author concludes, common features of all the cases of legal interpreting are that intercultural communication is shaped by the monolingual and monocultural bias that favours mainstream values and ideologies over otherised ones, and that interpreters are viewed as translation machines. The chapter is particularly insightful as it outlines the power dynamics that exist between different stakeholders. However, as the data are sourced from the personal reflections of interpreters, the conclusions may thus run the risk of being overly reliant on their subjective accounts, without being supported by more objective evidence. After all, bias is a relative notion; the monolingual bias mentioned here is framed from a bilingual/multilingual-sensitive angle. In addition, it is noticed in this chapter that the interpreters were treated in a mechanical manner, who reported being discontent with their unequal treatment as a stakeholder in legal negotiations. As they demonstrated their eagerness to receive acknowledgement, it is likely that they identified themselves as being more ‘within’ than ‘in between’ the conversations. Further discussion on the self-awareness and identity of legal interpreters could help bring the conclusion to a more critical level.

Chapter 6 is a comprehensive summary, returning to the two overarching questions raised at the very beginning of the book: 1) Why does intercultural communication often break down in interpreter-mediated encounters? and 2) How do interpreters deal with intercultural communication issues when they
arise? It ends with a proposal to reconsider the roles of interpreters and to engage authorities in rebalancing the intercultural communication landscape. Throughout the book, the author highlights the issue of power relations as the key to potential communicative breakdowns. The imbalance of power is a prominent feature of male-female, native-migrant and professional-layperson dichotomies. Minority individuals often experience a sense of inferiority and powerlessness under the dominance of monolingual and monocultural ideologies. The stereotyped ‘us-them’ distinction, as mentioned by the author, further contributes to the marginalisation of disadvantaged migrants, defining their discourse norms as uncommon and strange. While intercultural communications are mostly influenced by asymmetrical power relations between the two interlocutor sides in medical, legal and school settings, the business setting is featured by a power gap between dominant business males and powerless female interpreters.

While being restrained by complex power relations, the interpreters described in the book still demonstrate their strategic agency to achieve communicative success. The book highlights those who see themselves as being responsible, those who proactively and creatively engage in bridging cultural gaps without violating professional requirements or sacrificing client agendas, and those who rationally propose convictions to biases or stereotypes. It is implausible and impractical to expect interpreters to remain in a neutral position, but it is clearly evident that the interpreters’ choices depicted in this book are based on their agenda to rebalance power dynamics and achieve optimal communicative outcomes. As such, it is natural to consider how the individual interpreters’ own identities and dispositions influence their decision-making, which is unfortunately not discussed in this book. Investigations into individual differences in interpreter mindsets and behaviours could provide a more fine-grained perspective by which the context-specific coping strategies that are employed for intercultural clashes can be interpreted.

Overall, the book is well-written and offers an invaluable insight into the interactions between macro-societal power and the individual agency wielded by expert interpreters. Echoing the increased scholarly attention being paid to the individual agency of interpreters and the social factors that are specific to interpreting, this book brings the discussion to a more subtle, context-specific level. On one hand, it is timely to address the social aspect of interpreting, in line with the interdisciplinary shift in Translation and Interpreting Studies (Angelelli, 2014). On the other hand, it contributes to the conceptualisation of interpreting as intercultural communication (House, 2012). As this book contains a wealthy collection of exemplar communicative breakdowns and
interpreters’ strategic decisions, it could serve as a helpful guidance for both junior interpreters about to encounter similar challenges and more senior interpreters who seek self-reflexivity. For interpreting researchers, it can be read as a theoretical and methodological proposal of the ways to investigate problems and challenges involved in interpreting through the analysis of updated, real-world cases of interpreter-mediated encounters.

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