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Interpreting is interpreting: Why we need to leave behind interpreting settings to discover Comparative Interpreting Studies

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Abstract: This article argues that the use of interpreting settings as theoretical categories is no longer empirically sound. Instead, research should focus on the commonalities of all interpreting practice. This move is viewed as an enabling shift for the creation of Comparative Interpreting Studies, a strand dedicated to considering interpreting as a global practice. After discussing the rationale for the current use of interpreting settings as analytical categories, evidence from a variety of existing settings is used to illustrate the commonalities between all instances of interpreting and the fuzziness of the boundaries between these settings. It is argued that using interpreting settings leads to silo thinking, where researchers focus on research in the setting in which they are working, even when findings from other settings can be applied. The article ends with a discussion of the theoretical and practical potential of this move including the power of a comparative approach.

Keywords: interpreting studies; interpreting settings; comparative interpreting studies; categorization; interpreting theory; interpreting research methods

What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (Act II, Scene 2)

Introduction

William Shakespeare's lovestruck Juliet famously muses on the fact that the name of a thing has no effect on its nature. Whether Romeo is a Montague or a Capulet makes no difference, he is still the object of her affections. Over four hundred years later and, aside from a few devotees of the more-hardcore Sapir-Whorf flavor of linguistic relativism, most linguists would agree that

sheep will still be woolly and eat grass whether they are called “sheep,” “moutons,” “ovis aries” or something else entirely. Yet classifications do still matter. This article will discuss the problematic nature of current classifications in Interpreting Studies. More specifically, it will argue that the division of interpreting by researchers and practitioners into settings (e.g., conference, community, legal, humanitarian, church) has little, if any, empirical basis and has harmed research and theory. The only logical thing to do then is to recast theoretical Interpreting Studies as the search for commonalities between different instances of interpreting, rather than simply copying categories which may have professional relevance but have little theoretical purpose or justification.

It is argued that dispensing with the current categories of interpreting settings is both the foundation and the primary characteristic of any attempt to realize the project to build a comparative strand of Interpreting Studies, a project already discussed in a special issue of this journal. This move toward comparativism promises to open up Interpreting Studies to new research directions that will have a positive effect on both theory and practice. Before discussing the potential of this new direction, however, it is important to examine the rationale for dividing Interpreting Studies and interpreting itself into settings.

Dividing up interpreting studies

Interpreting researchers have often attempted to map the topology of the field by presenting classifications of different interpreting contexts or instances. Franz Pöchhacker’s landmark textbook, *Introducing Interpreting Studies*, presented a categorization of interpreting into business interpreting, liaison interpreting, diplomatic interpreting, court interpreting, and public service interpreting (Pöchhacker 2004: 14–15) alongside many others, including subdivisions of those settings. This division was a reflection of the way that work had already been grouped, rather than an attempt at a new mapping. Later in the same book, Pöchhacker used a more general distinction between “international settings” (161) and “community-based settings” (162) when discussing relationships between developments in the profession and developments in research.

Since the emergence of community interpreting research in the early-1990s, Interpreting Studies has seen a multiplication of the settings named and examined, including, most recently,

church interpreting (and its sub-setting “sermon interpreting”) (e.g., Rayman 2007; Karlik 2010; Hokkanen 2012; Downie 2014) and humanitarian interpreting (Luchner and Kherbiche 2018). It seems that whenever interpreting is found in a new social setting, there is a felt need for researchers to demarcate the interpreting they are studying from the interpreting that has been studied by everyone else. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that naming conventions for interpreting settings serve both an academic purpose – marking out the area of a scholar’s research interest – and a professional purpose, establishing the boundaries of the activities and interests of professional associations.

This may go some way to explaining why, for the most part, the map of interpreting settings used in research seems to coincide with common demarcations used by professionals. Witness for example, the name of the oldest association of professional interpreters, the *Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence* (the International Association of *Conference Interpreters*, emphasis mine) or indeed, in the United Kingdom, the existence of the Association of *Police and Court Interpreters* (emphasis mine). Their names and admission criteria assume that interpreting settings are immutable and that it makes good professional and political sense to sort interpreters according to the settings in which they work. Indeed, the marking of the territory of a professional association might also exist in an attempt to ensure that only those whose background and skills match those set by the association become active professionals in that domain.

In terms of lobbying and promotion, the needs of conference interpreters, who may work mostly with commercial and diplomatic clients, could be very different from those of police and court interpreters, whose work is mostly paid for by governmental and state organizations. Thus, the strategy and tactics to obtain better working conditions or better pay would be different for each group. Indeed, some groups of interpreters might find it useful to go even further down the differentiation track, with conference interpreters in the private market finding that they have interests and market sensitivities different from those of the staff of large intergovernmental organizations.

Similarly, given the apparent ease with which various interpreting settings and sub-settings are labeled by professionals, it is no surprise that scholars would attempt to further divide each setting. This is most clearly the case in conference interpreting where over several decades, researchers have attempted to divide up conference interpreting according to

information flows (Gile 1989), event type (Pöchhacker 1995; Alexieva 1997) or the profession of the audience (Kurz 1993; 1994; Vuorikoski 1998).

The idea of interpreting researchers reusing the categories established by practitioners appears like good bottom-up research. Few would seriously argue that “medical interpreting” is a problematic label for the interpreting observed by Claudia Angelelli in her ground-breaking observational study (Angelelli 2004b) or that the data from the O.J. Simpson trial closely analyzed by Anthony Pym is not an example of court interpreting (Pym 1999). In both those cases, the match between the socio-political contexts and the label given to them appears self-evident. Yet as soon as scholars begin to examine the labels themselves and what they might tell us about the interpreting going on in different social contexts, breakdowns inevitably occur, especially when scholars attempt to do anything more fine-grained than apply a single adjective to describe a setting. This shall become more apparent as specific examples are discussed later in this article.

As Andrew Chesterman (2008) reminds us, the usefulness of categorizations can be tested in much the same way as other hypotheses. Simplifying his argument only slightly, since categorizations are interpretive hypotheses, their use assumes that applying a label to a given phenomenon is useful in some way. It is entirely natural then that the categorizations and sub-categorizations of interpreting created by researchers should be subject to testing. In fact, since all of the sub-categorizations set out above were generated with the aim of improving theoretical precision, then testing them is vital.

Daniel Gile’s classification of interpreted events according to information flows, for example, had the aim of moving away from interpreter-centric research toward an understanding of interpreting through the eyes of delegates (1989: 650). His categorization was therefore set out with the aim of better understanding the social contexts in which interpreters worked and the constraints impinging upon them. This presages the much later move toward sociological research on interpreting (e.g., Angelelli 2004b; Hlavac 2012). After setting out several meeting types, Gile then proceeded to attempt to theorize how these meeting types would impose specific restrictions on the work of interpreters and in turn affect how interpreters would respond (Gile, 1989: 656–659). His categorization therefore moved very quickly from descriptive theory – building and naming categories – to predictive theory, which posited that these categories would result in differences in performance.

This move from descriptive to predictive theory reminds us that the naming and framing of categories necessarily involves predictive theorization. The argument that meetings with mostly one-way information flow (perhaps a typical scientific conference) deserve a name different from meetings with two-way information flow (perhaps a working group) entails a presumption that empirical study will be able to link those logistical differences with differences in some other variable. Categorization always entails prediction, even if it is not entirely clear what is being predicted. It is important to bear that in mind when looking more closely at existing setting-based categorizations.

To be theoretically operationalizable, categories or divisions must therefore consist of more than a label. Each category must be defined so that scholars can easily and unequivocally identify its members. Thus, it is not enough simply to have the name “court interpreting” or “conference interpreting”; there must be a clear idea of what features are distinctive of each setting and which are not. True, it might be possible to be a bit fuzzy about the exact edges of each setting – would simultaneous interpreting at a pharmaceutical conference be counted in “medical” or “conference” interpreting? – but there have to be at least some features that allow us to understand what each of the categories means and which features they should predict. These features could be as simple as the subject matter of the event or as complex as the political power of each of the participants.

In testing the usefulness of interpreting settings as analytical categories, analysis must therefore do more than quibble over words. Since categorizations are the foundation stones of theories, testing categories is the most fundamental test of a theory that can be done. If it is found that a category is ill-defined or corresponds to nothing much in the real-world, then the theory is flawed, no matter how much convincing data we might find. Settings must be established as legitimate, clearly-defined and empirically plausible categories before they can be used in theorization. Take away the empirical plausibility or problematize what is meant by a given label and any theory about them automatically crumbles.

Questioning the practical plausibility of settings is certainly not a new activity for researchers. As long ago as 1999, Holly Mikkelsen presented a conference paper (Mikkelsen 1999) arguing that the existing categorization of interpreting into settings was divisive and too easily slipped into the creation of a *de facto* hierarchy. The substance of her warning was that, rather than aligning the work of interpreters closely with settings as they are normally defined, it

is more fruitful to look to other social and political categories to understand differences in interpreter behavior. Needless to say, the continued use of the exact same categorization of settings that she decried, not to mention the addition of even more settings, testifies to the lack of attention paid to her warning. Between then and now, however, empirical evidence showing the theoretical weakness of these settings and the negative effect their continued use is having on interpreting research has mounted. It is important therefore to examine the principle evidence against the continued use of existing settings and against the division into settings altogether.

The evidence against interpreting settings

It has been a striking trend in Interpreting Studies that whenever unexpected interpreter behavior is found in one setting, analogous behavior is later found in a different one. This pattern is the key reason why the current categorization of settings is so problematic. A simple example is how the idea of interpreters being active participants, rather than passive conduits, in the events at which they work first arose in studies of sign language interpreting in an educational setting (Roy 1992) and spoken language immigration interpreting (Wadensjö 1992) only to be discovered much later in other settings. There is a direct line, for example, from Wadensjö's discussion of "divergent renditions" (1992: 146–47) to the work of Diriker (2004) on the differences between what conference interpreters say they do and what they actually do.

In the former case, far from being mistakes or infelicities, "divergent renditions" such as summaries, omissions or clarifications are presented as deliberate strategies. These strategies point toward interpreting being a social interaction created for a specific purpose, rather than simply an exercise in creating "equivalent 'texts'" (Wadensjö 1992: 148). Such renditions therefore mark both the status of the interpreter as an active participant and the contextualized decision-making that this requires, including the *de facto* regulation of turn-taking (ibid). We see a similar pattern in Diriker's work, which focuses on simultaneous interpreters due to their vulnerable position as those who are supposed to represent the words of others and yet take responsibility for any flaws in delivery (Diriker 2004: 52, 53). The fronting of the position of the interpreters was coupled with their active decision-making, such as the interpreters' decision to shift pronoun use away from the simple adoption of the equivalent of "I" whenever the speaker used it (138). This contextualized decision-making once again reflects the reality that authentic interpreting always takes place within social interactions.

The trope of interpreters working in social situations and therefore taking deliberate decisions to depart from simply relaying what the source language speaker said would go on to be found in such diverse settings as church interpreting, diplomatic conference interpreting, and legal interpreting. In the case of church interpreting, interpreters were consistently found making socially-determined adjustments to their output. In the case of Karlik's study of interpreting in churches in West Africa, interpreters often added phrases such as "which you know" or "which you remember" to improve the cohesion of their interpreting of Bible readings in the short consecutive mode (2010: 173). The interpreters studied by Vigouroux went even further, adjusting their role from interpreting what was said to acting as a first audience or even respondent to the sermon (2010: 355–60).

In diplomatic conference interpreting, Beaton (2007) showed that interpreters in the European Parliament adopted patterns of cohesion different from those of the original speakers. This included alternating their position between rendering "das Europäische Parlament" in the original German to "here" in English and changing references to "we" into "the European Parliament" (165). In addition, interpreters often used metaphor strings different from those of the original speakers, which had the effect of strengthening the representation of the institutional ideology of the European Union (194). It is clear that even in such structured settings, interpreters took deliberate decisions as to how to deal with the source texts they interpreted, decisions which reflect their role as active participants.

In court interpreting, Angermeyer's study of interpreting in small claims courts in New York City illustrated the complexity of the task and the extent to which social factors shaped and constrained performance. Interpreters altered their interpreting style according to the particular preferences of different arbitrators (Angermeyer 2015: 56–62). In addition, he found many instances of interpreters shifting their pronoun use according to the mode they were using (*chuchotage* out of English vs consecutive into English) and the addressees (the English-speaking participants vs the non-English speaker) (84–90). In both cases, departures from the source text were motivated by social constraints intrinsic to the individual event or interpreting mode, not by anything related to the overarching setting. In the first case, interpreters may have felt compelled to go along with the preferred style of the individual arbitrator, especially if the arbitrator emphasized finishing the hearing as quickly as possible. In the second case,

Angermeyer argues that shifting pronouns made it easier for the non-English speaker to understand who was speaking to whom about what (91).

It is worth remembering that shifting pronouns for contextual reasons was a feature of the conference interpreters studied by Diriker. In that latter case, it reflected the interpreters' desire to disown content when they felt their performance was being unfairly criticized (Diriker 2004: 138). Shifting pronouns to disown content was also found in Angermeyer's study, and the same author discussed how interpreters may use it to ensure they are not seen as the ultimate author of a remark (Angermeyer 2015: 90), a remarkably similar rationale to the one found in Diriker's work. These two contexts therefore share the feature of interpreters feeling the need to assert their independent speaking position to ensure that their audience understood whose content they were relaying. This surprising parallel is enough on its own to question how different the performance and felt needs of interpreters in different settings really are. If legal interpreters and conference interpreters alike share the need to clarify their position, it is worth asking which interpreters in other settings share the same need.

Of course, finding evidence that interpreters are active participants or adjust their pronoun use in every setting in which they work is not sufficient in itself to prove that the current preference for splitting interpreting into settings is unhelpful. After all, while all medical doctors treat humans, few would challenge the idea that it is helpful for their practice and research to make neurology a different specialization from phlebotomy. One might easily make the same argument for interpreters. Yes, they are all active participants, but the way this activity is realized will surely differ from assignment to assignment and the greatest difference will be between settings.

For that argument to work, it has to be shown that a change in setting is enough by itself to lead to a change in interpreter behavior. The problem for this argument is that there is precious little data to verify such a hypothesis, and the data that is available actually points to similarities across settings, not differences, as has been seen most clearly in the surprising similarity between the interpreters studied by Diriker (2004) and Angermeyer (2015). While there are indeed some differences in interpreter self-perception (e.g., Angelelli 2004a; Mellinger and Hanson 2018), some work on this area (e.g., Zwischenberger 2015) has argued that the continued existence of setting-specific professional norms – most notably those related to the figure of the interpreter as a neutral, distant mediator – are under threat, precisely because of the growth in research

showing interpreters to be active participants across settings. Indeed, there seems to be growing evidence that there is a great difference between interpreter self-perception and their actual behavior (Diriker 2004; Martínez-Gómez 2015). If this trend continues, it would suggest that any differences in self-perception are social and ideological constructions and do not reflect the realities of practice and behavior.

The search for any ideological and behavioral differences between interpreters working in different contexts is itself a reflection of the explanatory power of looking beyond the bounds of existing ‘settings’ and may well provide additional evidence against their continued use as analytical categories. As has been argued earlier in this article, the very existence of a professional separation between interpreters active in different settings is a political and ideological move. It is entirely plausible that it is this move, alongside concomitant differences in training, professional status, and research awareness, that lies behind the differences seen in self-perception. It may well be revealing to look back through existing data for evidence of correlations between training, years of experience, research awareness, and self-perceptions. Research showing differences in self-perception among interpreters working in different settings may help us understand how exactly these differences have come to be and whether other variables are as predictive or more predictive as the interpreting settings in which interpreters mostly work.

It seems challenging therefore to find much in the way of an empirical foundation for the continued use of interpreting settings as viable variables, especially if emphasis is put on authentic behavior over self-perception. In addition, their continued use actually serves as a theoretical weakness, hiding fundamental commonalities across all interpreting and encouraging silo thinking, as this article will now discuss.

What do categories and divisions hide?

Despite the ongoing division of interpreting into different settings, the fact that the same trends and issues arise with remarkable consistency is often obscured by what seem now to be entirely arbitrary boundaries. It helps to begin with a simple example.

What is the most basic boundary in Interpreting Studies? Surely the perceived chasm between professional and non-professional interpreting settings would seem to be a useful

candidate. The former is often associated with strong codes of ethics, socialization into certain norms, and the opportunity to be paid for work. The second cluster of interpreting settings is often associated with varying or non-existent standards, *ad hoc* decision-making, and a lack of any financial recompense. One would therefore imagine that the uses of each category of interpreting would be entirely separate and so would the interpreters involved in them.

Yet that is simply not the case. In church interpreting, for example, while many interpreters see their work as “service” (Hokkanen 2012) and work voluntarily, the cadre of church interpreters also includes professionally qualified interpreters, who sometimes work alongside untrained volunteers (Hokkanen 2016: 11). Outside of church interpreting, one study of sports interpreting found that Spanish sports journalists provided interpreting more attuned to broadcast norms than to the norms of professional interpreters (Ghignoli and Torres Díaz 2015). Thus, there is church interpreting, which might seem like non-professional interpreting, but which may include professionally qualified interpreters, and sports interpreting, which may seem like the sole preserve of professional interpreters, where those without interpreting training perform better and so may be chosen by clients above professional interpreters.

Assuming that sports interpreting is a professional setting hides the fact that untrained, non-professional interpreters may sometimes be preferred. Assuming that church interpreting is a non-professional setting hides the fact that professionals may interpret in church. In both cases, assuming that sports interpreting and church interpreting are entirely distinct obscures the fact that, in both cases, the emphasis is on producing a text that will serve the purposes of the event, whether that be to provide interviews that will work as journalistic output or a sermon that will be accepted as contextually and theologically valid by its hearers.

The fuzzy boundary between professional and non-professional interpreting is reflective of a wider fuzziness between many different interpreting settings. This fuzziness formed the foundation of Hokkanen’s (2012: 296–99) critique of Pöchhacker’s (2004: 23–24) typology of hitherto researched settings. Her description of church interpreting showed that it contained elements from across Pöchhacker’s typology, as well as novel elements. Of course, this does not mean that all interpreting contexts are somehow identical or that there are not clusters of features. What it does mean, however, is that extant typologies and especially the common distinctions among settings are not theoretically or empirically water-tight.

A more subtle critique of the empirical validity of established interpreting settings is found in Killman's (2020) theoretical reconsideration of the nature of asylum interpreting. He points out that the extant literature on asylum interpreting contextualized the practice within the wider setting of legal interpreting and focused on adversarial settings, such as asylum interviews, hearings, and work in police stations (74–78). This left out the important co-operative contexts of attorney-client meetings. These differ from the other meetings studied under the rubric of asylum interpreting not just in their co-operative and collaborative nature but in the wider range of tasks interpreters are asked to perform during them (80–82). These differences lead to a clear problem with categorization, which is alluded to in Killman's work (83–85), regarding the need for suitably context-aware interpreter education. In the context of the wider challenge to the validity of interpreting settings as analytical categories put forward in the present article, however, the challenge can be made more direct.

If attorney-client interactions involve expectations and behaviors that diverge from those found in other instances of asylum interpreting, then there are two options. Either such interactions need to be seen as a setting in their own right, which would obscure their place as part of the wider asylum process and by extension as an interaction within legal interpreting, or they need to be seen as a sub-setting of asylum interpreting with their own specific norms and expectations. The weakness of this latter route is that it reduces the explanatory and predictive power of asylum interpreting as a setting. Attorney-client interactions would represent a notable and troublesome exception to any theory that attempts to explain what is involved and expected in asylum interpreting and to justify its use as an analytical category. Indeed, since Killman contextualized his discussion of asylum interpreting within wider research on legal interpreting (Killman 2020: 74), a similar remark could also be made about the assumed homogeneity and theoretical predictiveness of that setting too.

Erecting barriers around court interpreting or conference interpreting or any other setting creates a danger that researchers might assume that the kinds of socially-constructed constraints they find or the shifts made by the interpreters they are studying are somehow the result of something unique to the specific setting they are examining. In doing so, they might fall into the same trap as Al-Zahrani, who after a cursory summary of research in other interpreting settings (2007: 18–21) went on to discuss interpreters as cultural mediators in conference interpreting

with hardly even a glance toward discussions of the topic in research outside of that area (146–153), discussions easily accessible in, for example, the book edited by Ian Mason (2001).

The greatest limitation of the current recourse to interpreting settings is therefore that it encourages silo thinking, where it is possible to assume that the most relevant literature will always be the literature written on interpreting in the same setting the researcher is currently studying. While this may be true, there will be times where concepts or ideas have been more thoroughly researched elsewhere in the discipline, providing a more nuanced discussion than might yet be available in a given setting. Removing the use of interpreting settings as they are now understood therefore lowers the barriers between studies of interpreting in different contexts and encourages researchers to seek parallels between their particular research site and others that have already been studied.

It must be said, however, that there are institutional and pedagogical differences that may help to explain the barriers between the different contexts in which interpreting takes place. In the United Kingdom, for example, the accepted criterion for entry into legal interpreting and medical interpreting is passing an appropriate version of the Diploma of Public Service Interpreting examination, run by the Chartered Institute of Linguists. Entry into conference interpreting is commonly through a postgraduate diploma or master's degree from a university. Interpreters are therefore separated according to broad contextual criteria at an early point in their training. Since interpreter training and interpreting research have long been closely related, with many researchers also being trainers, it would seem natural that research would follow a similar trajectory to training, especially if a similar division in training along these broad contextual lines exists in other countries. Indeed, the account of Mizuno (2006: 71) shows something similar taking place in community interpreter training in Japan, with the difference that there, research came first, spearheaded by those in legal professions, before it was taken up by interpreter trainers. The precise reasons why such a division developed alongside its pedagogical and geographical scope and effect on research in different countries remain to be studied but this division would seem to be behind the barriers between research on interpreting practiced in different contexts and a likely explanatory factor and a further justification for an approach to research that seeks to lower such barriers.

Lowering the barriers in this way follows the logic that interpreting is an essentially unified phenomenon with shared features and constraints, such as linguistic difference,

immediacy of production and reception, repeatability (all from Wurm 2010: 39) and a linearity that limits revisiting much earlier segments for correction (Shlesinger 1995: 194). That this phenomenon takes place in a variety of social, political and economic contexts, which impose their own additional constraints, in terms of language register, simultaneity, performance expectations, power imbalance, cultural difference, and organizational expectations, does not reduce its essential unity. Interpreting is interpreting, even if each context and perhaps each event will bring unique challenges for all those involved. Indeed, it is entirely possible and perhaps to be expected that even within the space of an individual interpreted event, the particular constraints and expectations might shift, providing further support for the need to look across the traditional boundaries of settings.

What does it mean that interpreting is interpreting?

Seeing interpreting as a unified phenomenon that takes place under a variety of constraints and in a variety of social contexts renders it impossible to assume that court interpreting, conference interpreting, medical interpreting and interpreting in any other setting can be treated as *sui generis*. Instead of seeking to examine the differences between interpreting in different ‘settings,’ looking past these settings means seeking common ground between them. If interpreters are *always* active participants and if their decisions are *always* the result of complex social and contextual factors, then it makes sense that at least some of these will be shared no matter the context, no matter the users.

It is important, however, to understand that arguing against the empirical validity of settings as categories and appealing for a focus on common ground between different interpreting contexts does not mean denying the differences between interpreting in these different contexts. Just because sports interpreting shares a number of common features with church interpreting does not mean that they are identical. On the contrary, if interpreting settings are empirically invalid, this opens the door to new kinds of research that seeks to understand what categories and variables *are* valid. If it is assumed that interpreter behavior is socially constructed and socially defined, an assumption that seems relatively safe given the studies mentioned above, then it is important to understand how this construction happens and in what ways social context governs interpreter behavior.

This goes beyond any sociologies of interpreting that would place the interpreter or their decisions at the core of analysis, as if an interpreted event existed for the purpose of producing interpreting. One feature shared by all interpreted events is that the interpreting itself is simply a part of a wider process of meaning making toward a shared goal (Turner 2005). Side-lining interpreting settings as categories opens the way for researchers to explore how this process takes place and to find similarities in this process across contexts, perhaps even contexts that have not been previously deemed to be a part of interpreting proper, such as (inter)cultural mediation (Verrept 2008; Phelan and Martín 2010; Pokorn and Južnič 2020) and child language brokering (Antonini 2016; Napier 2017), although such extensions would be challenging and are beyond the scope of this article. Exploring the meaning-making process across contexts would necessarily mean zooming out from the work of individual interpreters and pre-defined settings to ask questions about meaning making in interpreting more generally.

If ending the use of interpreting settings as (pseudo-)homogenous categories means looking at interpreting in a more holistic way, then, of course, this cannot mean the imposition of norms and criteria from one set of interpreting contexts onto another. Clifford (2004) and Dean and Pollard (2006; 2009) are three scholars among many who have rightly challenged the applicability of the traditional and now problematized conference interpreting norms of neutrality and interpreter invisibility to community interpreting and sign language interpreting. Indeed, *contra* Ozolins (2016), it is instructive to read the challenging of these norms in the work of Wadensjö (1992) and Roy (1992; 1999) as the key that unlocked what Pöchhacker would later label the “dialogic discourse-based interaction paradigm” (Pöchhacker 2004: 79) and its focus on the interpreter as an active participant. This stream of research then overflowed into other areas, eventually washing ashore in conference interpreting, in the work of Diriker (2004) and Eraslan (2011), ironically and appropriately, the very source of the norms that the discourse paradigm set itself against.

By giving a more nuanced description of the specific context in which the researcher has carried out their research, following the examples of Angelelli (2004b), Diriker (2004), and Angermeyer (2015), researchers can avoid any prescriptivism deriving from pre-existing expectations. Taking the example of Angermeyer’s (2015) analysis of the specific small claims court contexts he was investigating, the logistics of managing the caseload of the court (18–21), the training and approach of each interpreter (69–74) and even the personal working styles of the

arbitrators involved (42–68) turned out to be vital variables in each case. The behavior of the interpreters and operation of each hearing was far too complex to be understood through the murky lens of the hearings as an example of ‘court interpreting’ or ‘legal interpreting.’ Deeper, more contextually-aware descriptions, like those used by Angermeyer, are therefore necessary if researchers are to find commonalities across interpreting contexts – a search that will be described in more detail later in this article.

Of course, books afford more space for clear descriptions of interpreting contexts than academic papers but that is not an excuse to fall back into the blithe use of interpreting settings, as if they were unproblematic. Clifford (2004: 89–90) has given an excellent example of how relevant data about the context of a specific interpreted event can be described even in the space of a small vignette. Karlik (2010) and Vigouroux (2010) have similarly illustrated how such data can be interwoven into the structure of the paper itself so that readers can clearly trace the links between the context in which an interpreter works and the decisions they make in response to specific authentic prompts.

There is therefore no need for the use of interpreting settings as descriptors and no theoretical justification for their continued proliferation. Attention to both the uniqueness of an interpreted event and the commonalities it shares with other events offers greater opportunities for theoretical and methodological cross-pollination, as seen clearly in the earlier example of how the “dialogic discourse-based interaction paradigm” (Pöchhacker 2004: 79) moved from being the sole preserve of sign language and community interpreting to fundamentally altering research on conference interpreting.

By relying on detailed explanations of interpreted events, rather than the labels of interpreting settings, it will become possible to create Comparative Interpreting Studies as a sub-discipline that seeks to map the common features of all instances of interpreting and theorize their realization in different contexts, whether professional or non-professional. The potential of this sub-discipline and the approaches needed for it to work are discussed below.

Toward Comparative Interpreting Studies

Just as one purpose of Comparative Literature has been “to be a thorn in the side of national literatures” (Moretti 2000: 68), it would seem that the problematic nature of interpreting settings

as theoretically useful constructs presages a need for Comparative Interpreting Studies to perform a similar cajoling role to both professional practice and academic theorization. Instead of the accretion of case studies within a given setting, there is now a need for critical studies to look for commonalities across traditional setting-based boundaries. This reflects the central thrust of Tyulenev and Zheng's call in a special issue of this journal dedicated to "Comparative Translation and Interpreting Studies," in which they argued that comparative research seeks to "discover the generalizable principal features of the phenomenon at hand and understand its role in larger systems" (Tyulenev and Zheng 2017: 199).

The basic tools for such a project are already within reach. Angelelli (2004a) has built a survey tool that has led to the gathering of data on interpreter self-perceptions among conference, medical and court interpreters. Likewise, Hatim and Mason's linguistic account of interpreting (1997: 36–77) argued for the application of discourse analysis across simultaneous, consecutive and dialogue interpreting. Equally, the ongoing growth of corpus-based interpreting studies (e.g., Shlesinger 1998; Bendazzoli and Sandrelli 2009; Collard and Defrancq 2019), offers the opportunity to run identical analyses on corpora from different interpreting settings, which in turn allows the isolation of the linguistic, cognitive and text-linguistic tools that interpreters have at their disposal and to produce statistical accounts of differences between different instances of interpreting in terms of the use of these tools.

In fact, corpus data could put to rest for good the question of whether settings show any signs of constraining or determining interpreter output. For example, the common belief that court interpreters have less freedom to summarize, switch pronouns or offer explanations could be verified based on large-scale corpora. Such corpora would also allow the examination of the kind of intra-setting and inter-interpreter differences already discovered in the work of Angermeyer. Of course, no single method would be sufficient on its own to fulfill all the potential of Comparative Interpreting Studies. The limitation of a corpus-based approach would be that any quantitative results would need to be triangulated with detailed qualitative descriptions of the social and professional context and the actors involved. Indeed, the very driving forces of Comparative Interpreting Studies – challenging the empirical validity of interpreting settings, exploring and explaining the shared features of all interpreting, and improving understanding of interpreting as a united but contextually-situated practice – require

the use of a variety of methods to justify the uniting of what have historically been largely separate streams of research.

In brief, the advent of Comparative Interpreting Studies would push Interpreting Studies beyond the accretion of independent case studies, however detailed, into the realm of meta-analysis and the systematization of interpreting research. It also promises to enable the contextualization of interpreting itself within the wider social, economic and political structures in which it exists, in a similar fashion to the ways in which Comparative Literature has opened the way to understand how these variables affect the production and consumption of literary and academic texts (e.g., Apter 2003). Such a meta-analytical and systematic project would create new horizons for research and provide useful theoretical and practical insights.

This project would reflect the ways in which studies of the history of interpreting have already demonstrated the situatedness and recent creation of the very interpreting settings that have been discussed in this article. In her paper on the history of the *metourguemanim*, who interpreted readings from the Torah and prophets in Jewish synagogues in antiquity, Francine Kaufmann argues that knowledge of the records of these practices will “help illuminate previously poorly known aspects of the history of the profession. In doing this, we may find ourselves revising and re-evaluating current professional norms, and asking ourselves how far current practice may benefit from being compared to different norms that have proved their worth” (Kaufmann 2005, 973, my translation). Similarly, Rothman’s (2009) study of Venetian dragomans working in Istanbul in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries clearly shows how their norms and roles involved translation, interpreting, cultural consultancy and even gatekeeping, given the requirements of the pluralistic and cosmopolitan society in which they lived and worked.

The growth of a comparative strand of Interpreting Studies would encourage more diachronic studies of the development of interpreting practices across time and place, while the application of similar methods to synchronic studies of different instances of interpreting would allow the theorization of interpreting as a global practice. Recent work by Pokorn and Južnič (2020) has already shown how such synchronic studies can illuminate the fuzzy, or even contradictory, nature of boundaries between interpreting and related professions. At the most basic level, such theorization would begin to isolate and define the variables that are in play whenever interpreting takes place, rather than those that only apply in specific cases. Variable

definition and isolation are the most basic level of theorization. The advent of Comparative Interpreting Studies would allow for the possibility of disentangling how such variables of wider relevance are related. It could only be by synthesizing studies that cover interpreting in courts, police stations, conferences and doctors' offices, among other settings, times, and places, that researchers could isolate the features of interpreter-specific language use or "interpretese" (He, Boyd-Graber, and Daumé III 2016). Discussions of the use of new interpreting technologies have already benefited from being based on findings from across interpreting practice (Braun and Taylor 2012), which suggests that increasing such work would be equally beneficial to other research questions.

A comparative approach would also create an opportunity for researchers to re-examine existing data using analytical methods imported from other areas of the field. Taking corpora of conference interpreting and applying research methods on interpreter footing (for example those used by Berk-Seligson 2002) would help to create a clearer picture of how conference interpreters position themselves vis-à-vis speakers and the audience. Answering the call for more work on sign language interpreter cognition (Wilcox and Shaffer 2005) would allow much more generalized theorization of how interpreters interpret.

The aim of Comparative Interpreting Studies would therefore be to map the variables that matter across all instances of interpreting, wherever and whenever it happens and whoever is interpreting, before seeking to understand how they relate to one another. This therefore expands on the kinds of meta-analysis that have already been done on research that seeks to answer similar questions in a smaller number of contexts, such as Pöchhacker's (2009) summary of work on interpreters' self-perceptions in both conference interpreting and community interpreting. This shows that such work can be both theoretically and practically revealing.

The practical outcomes of the development of Comparative Interpreting Studies deserve special mention. Despite the threat to the existing compartmentalization of the interpreting profession, this process is likely to have a positive impact on practice. It is only through a comparative lens that researchers and professionals could discover the differences between trained professional and untrained unprofessional performance. If, as the profession might expect, these differences are closely tied to differences in the outcomes of interpreting, then their existence and nature would be of vital importance to the interpreting community. In parallel to this, knowledge of the skills and tools that are common among all competent interpreters would

allow for the creation of core interpreting pedagogies that ensure that all interpreters receive a common initial training program, wherever they are going to practice, as is common in medical and judicial professions.

Where Comparative Interpreting Studies is likely to be more revealing and potentially more controversial for researchers and practitioners alike is that, by testing and problematizing existing categories, comparative study would lead to the emergence of new categories that might compete with the old. If, as this article has maintained, the division of interpreting and Interpreting Studies into settings has little theoretical or empirical basis, then the question arises as to which kinds of divisions would be more empirically and theoretically viable. It may be that previous discussions of the effects of imbalances of power (Merlini and Favaron 2003; Rayman 2007; Mathews 2011; Angermeyer 2015) or information flows (Gile 1989) provide a more stable basis or indeed that some new basis of categorization is found.

Conclusion

This article sought to problematize the continued division of Interpreting Studies and professional interpreting into quasi-independent settings. While such divisions are reflective of professional nomenclature and allow the clear delineation of academic or professional territory, there is now solid empirical evidence casting doubt on whether such divisions are predictive of interpreter behavior or stakeholder expectations. In fact, evidence is increasingly pointing toward the need to characterize interpreting as a single multilingual phenomenon that exists in different contexts and is therefore subject to a variety of constraints. Through this lens, it becomes apparent that there is a need to move away from current divisions, toward a more unified, comparative approach, which seeks to define and isolate the variables that have explanatory or predictive power in interpreting and how they are related. This requires the growth and development of Comparative Interpreting Studies and its associated analytical tools.

To explain what, if anything, is truly unique about specific interpreting contexts, researchers need to go much further than simply appealing to pre-existing professional norms or what is thought to be true about a specific setting. Instead, creative means have to be found to explain to readers the pertinent factors underlying a specific instance of interpreting. This switch toward a more nuanced description of the contexts in which interpreting takes place is a vital part

in developing the comparative approach put forward in this article. This approach in turn provides the basis for more generalized theorization of interpreting, based on a new, more empirically-justified categorization of the contexts in which interpreting takes place and how these impinge on the people, process and products of interpreting.

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