

ASYMMETRIES IN RETOUR INTERPRETING: AN ETHICAL APPROACH TO BIDIRECTIONALITY IN INTERPRETER EDUCATION

Asimetrías en la interpretación inversa: un acercamiento ético a la bidireccionalidad en didáctica de la interpretación

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ABSTRACT: Retour interpreters, aware as they may be of cultural and power asymmetries in the practice of interpreting, take a double (bi)cultural turn when they attempt to juggle all the cognitive efforts involved while working from their mother tongue into a second language and, even more so, when performing bilateral interpreting. Teaching retour is not made easier by the well-chronicled taboo of bi-directionality in interpreting (see, for example, Harris 1990, 16). The myth that one should not interpret to-and-fro is still lurking, negatively affecting those schools where interpreting into B has never been taught, while in other universities it is considered a must in the curriculum and students pride themselves in their retour.

Keywords: interpreting education; retour; directionality; ethics; bilateral

1. INTRODUCTION

In the West since the second half of the twentieth century, interpreting has been seen as necessarily taking place in one direction, from a B language into an A language. Yet the complexity of the communicative process has always needed professionals to perform into their second language, as is the case of bilateral or liaison interpreting, and also in simultaneous interpreting in a variety of contexts (for a discussion of communicative contexts in which the B to A norm is not practical, see Harris 1990, 117).

As Stévaux put it, “at the dawn of simultaneous interpreting, in diplomatic spheres and also in large international organisations still in their embryony stages back then, retour interpreting was a common practice” (Stévaux 2003). Despite these early beginnings, in the West, it has prescriptively been considered that conference interpreting in international organisations should be performed only towards one’s native tongue, that is, from the interpreter’s B or C language into their A language. This has changed as of late for certain languages where it is difficult to find interpreters with a high level of, say, Polish as a B-language, whereas existing Polish interpreters can convey a message into English-B (Gumul 2017). In regional interpreting markets, perhaps due to lack of resources, schools and associations are now less strict in this respect, and retour interpreting is still seen as a necessary evil by many, while others defend it with practical or scientific reasoning, including it in their curricula (Denissenko 1989, 157). In Eastern European schools, however, retour interpreting was a frequent practice, and Russian was used as *pivot* language to interpret into other languages (Pöchhacker 2004, 21).

As hinted by Gumul (2017), seeing the issue of directionality in such a Manichaean perspective is anything but scientific: “In contrast to the two prevailing dogmas of the past, recent research provides a wealth of evidence indicating that this issue, for various reasons, certainly cannot be perceived in terms

of a clear-cut dichotomy” (Gumul 2017). Arguments for or against bidirectionality are sometimes presented in such a way that suggests to the reader that one answer in the dichotomy is true (for a full historical account, see Brander and Opdenhoff 2014), mostly following the teachings of the Paris school, where only direct interpreting was taught (AIIC 1965, 69), while retour interpreting was accepted solely as a linguistic exercise (AIIC 1965, 71, Skuncke: 1976 and AIIC 1977, 41).

These obsolete views about directionality are slowly changing, and some researchers have followed pioneering authors (see, for example, Harris 1976; Snelling 1992 or Gile 1995) on this taboo subject. Harris (1992) described a postgraduate two-year course in Ottawa, where using retour from French into English and vice versa was naturally required in the Canadian market. As Dollerup (2005) put it in his review of the volume edited by Godijns and Hinderdael (2005):

[...] even simultaneous conference interpreters have to live with the real-life fact that they have to render messages delivered in their A or C-languages into their B-language. It is telling that it is the advent on the world stage of many small nations that obliges the scholarly community to take translation and interpreting into the translators’ or interpreters’ B- and C- languages seriously. The (largely Francophone) AIIC – which is mentioned in the book – has ignored this fact; it deserves no thanks for that pointless and pathetic effort. One hopes that this book gets many readers (Dollerup 2005).

Indeed, Gile’s (2005) chapter in this book has been widely read, constituting a milestone in the study of retour interpreting and inspiring a new generation of researchers on the subject (see, for example, Nicodemus 2013). Gile provides the interpreting community with one of the first fallacy-free theoretical reflections about retour, helping dispel common myths, lobby interests and other dichotomous thinking among professionals, students and, most importantly, lecturers.

From an ethical perspective, fueling such dichotomous thinking, however unwittingly, is arguably unethical, not only with respect to deontology for professional interpreters (who might not see the manipulations at stake), but also for academics who have an ethical responsibility to lead the way for future generations of interpreters. For nearly twenty years, the question has not been whether retour interpreting can be performed, but how to improve its quality through better education (Snelling 1992; Harris 1990, 1992). In fact, recent studies show that the practice of retour may actually help interpreters improve their lexical retrieval skills when interpreting into their A-language:

Contrary to predictions, unidirectional interpreters did not manifest directionality asymmetry and their L2–L1 translation latencies were not shorter than L1–L2 translation latencies. Surprisingly, the L2–L1 direction advantage was found in the group of bidirectional interpreters. The data suggest that the dominant directionality in interpreting practice has little impact on the strength of interlingual lexical links in the interpreter’s mental lexicon or that other factors (such as language use, exposure and immersion) might offset any such impact (Chmiel 2016).

Interpreting studies benefit from such empirical research that proves or dispels theories, and is also slowly being enriched, under the umbrella of translation paradigms, with ethical, ideological or political considerations concerning a range of issues: the asymmetry in language choices taken by interpreters; the prevalence of monolingualism in certain contexts where interpretation is necessary (e.g. interpreting for refugees, legal interpreting, institutional settings, etc.); the role played by bilingualism in child interpreters; or the realisation of the prevalence of a Eurocentric and/or, androcentric approach to interpreting and interpreting research.

In simultaneous conference interpreting, the use of expensive technologies has both created and reduced the knowledge gap in our field, whereas in certain modalities and contexts, access to computers and knowledge remains asymmetrical. Access to interpreters as knowledge brokers, though stated as a right in some countries, generally remains a luxury, as does access to Information Technology in general.

From an ethical standpoint, when teaching retour, lecturers decide whether students should become aware of inequalities, thus developing their critical thinking skills.

In this paper we will first see how the issue of power asymmetries in retour interpreting education is linked to ethical concepts in didactics such as manipulation or motivation (borrowed from the field of psychology). In a second part, we will discuss foreign-language teaching to find common ground which could further dispel fallacious dichotomies in retour education.

2. FROM POWER ASYMMETRIES TO RETOUR VARIABLES: AN ETHICAL DISEQUILIBRIUM ON THE INTERPRETER'S TIGHTROPE

If smaller differences between A and B languages and between production and comprehension requirements are assumed, the resulting directionality difference in terms of cognitive load may be small indeed. [...] Such research-based conclusions [...] would demonstrate that directionality doctrines, no matter how strongly proclaimed, do not have a uniformly solid foundation. They could also generate a new mindset among “Western” interpreting practitioners and trainers, more favorable to further work and experimenting with specific training methods to tackle problems associated with work from a B language, and problems associated with work into a B language (Gile 2005, 9).

These “directionality doctrines” and their lack of a “uniformly solid foundation” put forward by Gile (2005) are an example of how power asymmetries can result in a manipulation of professional realities, which may then have an impact on educational policies, or even the economic, political and social status of professional practices, thus creating more inequalities in the interpreting community.

According to Gile’s (1999) “Tightrope hypothesis”, the cognitive load of simultaneous interpreters tends to be close to saturation; that is why they sometimes make mistakes “even when no clear problem triggers such as fast delivery, strong accents, particularly complex syntactic structures, non-standard or rare lexical units, disturbing noises etc. can be identified in the source speech” (Gile 2005)¹. Together with Harris’ notions on “natural translation” and his ideas on the norm in retour (1990, 117), these two authors provided the foundations for substantiated research proving that: interpreting into B, firstly, is widespread (see, for example, Al-Salman 2002 and Opdenhoff 2011), that its quality depends on specific variables that can be studied empirically (Tommola 1998; Donovan 2004; Seel 2005; Opdenhoff 2012; Chmiel 2016), and, that there are ways to improve the teaching of retour interpreting (see, for example, Snelling 1992; Grosman 2000; Bartłomiejczyk 2006; Opdenhoff and Brander 2009)².

Yet the issue of directionality can also be studied from deontological, ethical and meta-ethical viewpoints, to see how to best motivate students and give them enough confidence to perform into B or, contrariwise, to see how they can be manipulated into thinking that they are incapable of doing so:

[...] No empirical evidence is available on the effect of the interpreters’ attitudes, and in particular motivation and confidence, on conference interpreting performance, but its importance is widely taken for granted in interpreting circles, where over and above the intellectual aspect, interpreting is often likened to sports or to artistic performance (see for instance Kondo 2003, 95). It is therefore of interest to find out how interpreters feel about directionality. The focus here is on individual, “private” interpreters, as opposed to “official” statements by institutions and trainers, which may be strongly influenced by norms and dogma,

1. For a list of language-specific factors affecting retour see Gile 2005.

2. On the difference between competence, skill, and aptitude, as well as a list of competences in retour, see Brander and Opdenhoff 2014.

and on professional interpreters, as opposed to student interpreters, who may lack the basis for a realistic assessment of their interpreting performance (Gile 2005).

How can the power asymmetries between student interpreters, professional interpreters, and official institutions and teachers affect the imbalance of the variables involved? Intuitively, when a teacher tells their students that a given task or practice is wrong, of inferior quality or somehow ethically problematic, or simply impossible for them to perform “because they are not native speakers”, these students logically cannot put much interest in the task and easily give up. Empirical research on motivation substantiates this intuitive answer:

Thus, incentive value covaries inversely with task difficulty. In addition, probability of success covaries inversely with task difficulty, obviously with easy tasks having higher probability of success than harder tasks. [...] This convention led to the long-standing focus on probability and expectation for success in most research on achievement motivation (Pintrich 1996, 291).

In other words, perceiving a task as attainable increases the student’s chances of performing it well, especially if the task is believed to be important (Wigfield 1992). These studies are essential to education in every field, namely interpreter training. The student’s perception of the ethical importance of a specific exercise can improve motivation, and may increase chances of completion of tasks.

3. AN ETHICAL APPROACH TO RETOUR INTERPRETER EDUCATION: ASYMMETRIES IN SECOND-LANGUAGE TEACHING

[...] the Indian-born doctor Abraham Verghese recalls an incident that occurred soon after his arrival in the United States. Emboldened by his medical abilities and high scores in the required examinations, Verghese is confident of obtaining an internship at [...] a prestigious medical school. However, a more experienced compatriot warns him that these hospitals “have never taken a foreign medical graduate” and advises Verghese “not even to bother with that kind of place.” Instead, he is told to apply to more humble “Ellis Island” hospitals, those situated in inner cities and rural areas, which U.S. doctors avoid. “We are”, Verghese’s compatriot continues, “like a transplanted organ –lifesaving and desperately needed, but rejected because we are foreign tissue” (Braine, 1999, 14).

Similarly, retour-teaching native speakers are a rare sight in those universities where cultural asymmetries and traditions overpower ethical arguments.

In previous work (Brander 2010; 2012; 2016), we discussed the rights and obligations of students, lecturers and academics, as well as basic research on the ethics of teaching and academia, and of professional ethics, compared to the concept of deontology traditionally used in interpreting classes (Martínez 2010).

There are at least three aspects where traditional deontology meets ethical and pedagogical requirements, both in the teaching of retour and, more generally, in the way we view academia from constructivist, liberal, institutional, or simply practical perspectives: firstly, it is a fact that not all students are capable of successfully performing interpreting into B at the age of 21 (but most, from our experience, can, and often do it well). A high language level is a prerequisite (although, as Gile, 2005, underlines, mastery of a language is not enough; familiarity with the topic, cognitive skills such as working memory capacity, and much practice, must be added to the equation). The lecturer may try to control all other variables to simplify the task at first and help students automatise certain techniques. Yet, a certain level of proficiency in the B-language remains a necessary first step in order to cope with going to-and-fro from cultures and languages; in this sense, retour interpreters are truly excellent.

Secondly, *retour* remains context-dependent: for example, a 20-year-old third-year interpreting student willing to interpret a couple of questions in *retour* in consecutive mode at a mock conference needs to be proficient in her B-language, but she will require so in a different manner to a 21-year-old fourth-year student interpreting an introduction into B-German in simultaneous mode in a real-life conference. Similarly, for a Polish or Swedish professional interpreter into English B in a European institution, the words proficiency, quality or excellence will convey a different meaning. Proficiency (not bilingualism) in a given language is also context-dependent, which takes us to the third ethically-charged aspect: it is preferable for *retour* to be taught by a native speaker.

The literature on second-language acquisition, as other fields transversal to ours (ethics, didactics) has been traditionally ignored by interpreting lecturers. Even the most belligerent defenders of the rights of non-native language teachers (see, for example, Braine 1999, who denounced power and social asymmetries in non-native English teachers, or Moussu 2008, who provided a compilation of research on the subject) write their papers in English. These academics probably have their articles revised or corrected by native English speakers before publication, as they should. The fact that publications in languages other than English are scarcer is a different question altogether; it would be fallacious to use such arguments to defend the hiring of only local teachers, as if foreigners were somewhat at fault for political or cultural asymmetries.

Fallacious or interested arguments notwithstanding (such as the false dichotomy of the native vs. the non-native), let us be clear: a non-native speaker can be a wonderful teacher. Yet, when it comes to certain specific aspects, i.e. correction of renditions at the highest level of quality (such as the level required by translators and interpreters into B), or the teaching of oral turns in conversational language, to give but two examples of the idiosyncrasies and subtleties at stake, a native speaker is still required, much in the same way as a native corrector of, say, Spanish, is required when revising a text translated into that language by foreigners, however proficient in the language these may be.

There are many variables involved when selecting teachers for specific purposes, including the ages of the students, or the objectives to be attained: if we want to prepare an adult for an exam to become a language teacher we will proceed differently than when 20-year-olds learn literature in their native language. If we select a teacher for a 2-year old learning Mandarin, do we want the child to become completely bilingual, or simply proficient? One has to reflect on one's objectives, and which teacher will best cater for the student's needs. There are specific instances where a native speaker is highly desirable, which range from the teaching of pronunciation and the acquisition of a language's cognitive structure in toddlers, to *retour* interpreting at a high level. The choice is not between the exquisitely-prepared philologist and the clueless native speaker on holiday; things are not so starkly contrasted. Interpreting education is a good example that dispels such fallacious dichotomies.

Another source of inspiration where answers may be found are studies on bilingualism, which constitute a crucial field to the discussion on *retour* interpreting. Prescriptive works on interpreting (but also on language acquisition), though well-intentioned, seem to have ignored these findings. This has led, for instance, to extraordinary situations in Spain whereby some regional governments have created so-called "bilingual" schools, firing teachers who could not certify English-language proficiency, while forcing others who spoke a smattering of English to teach sciences or maths in English (to students who, naturally, did not understand them), or employing young, native but inexperienced teaching assistants for a year at a time. None of these professionals are to blame for the outcome of such policies; these days, the word "bilingualism" in Spain makes people flinch, be they teachers, parents or students, in a manner comparable to that caused by the expression "linguistic immersion" in the classroom.

Translators and interpreters, like academics in every field of research, pride themselves in the excellence of their work, which includes accepting that their proficiency has reached a stage of refinement where they require a native speaker to have a last look at their essay before a deadline. Reaching such a

high level of skill in the second-language you are aware of the need for a native speaker to give you input is not an elitist or colonialist thought (the second language may not even be English): it is a fact of life for some students, though not all. In a field like translation and interpreting, where the highest proficiency and excellence are required, it would be unprofessional and unethical to have retour interpreting taught by a non-native when such people are available.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Retour interpreters, aware as they may be of linguistic, cultural and professional asymmetries in the practice of interpreting, take a double (bi)cultural turn when they attempt to juggle all the cognitive efforts involved while working from their mother tongue into a second language and, even more so, when performing bilateral interpreting. Teaching retour is not made easier by the well-chronicled taboo of bi-directionality in interpreting (see, for example, Harris 1990, 16). The myth that one should not interpret to-and-fro is still lurking, negatively affecting those schools where interpreting into B has never been taught, while in other universities it is considered a must in the curriculum and students pride themselves in their retour.

In 2005, the question answered by Gile in a most pedagogical and critical manner was whether the interpreting community had been wrong about retour interpreting for decades. In previous research, we tried to deliver our conception of retour interpreter training as the education of high-quality professionals who are also ethically-aware citizens. In 2014, we concluded the dilemma was no longer whether to perform retour interpreting or not, but how best to teach it (Brander and Opdenhoff 2014). The problem is not cognitive or biological: if Canadians, Russians or Swedes are capable of such a feat, there is no reason why the rest of us should not be allowed to try.

A good retour depends not only of cognitive factors, but on the rights and obligations of students and lecturers, and of the obligations as academics and scholars to surpass ignorance, manipulation, or individual or lobby interests for the public good. Aye, there's the rub. If professionals indeed interpret into B (which they do), they may as well receive some instruction; when retour is not in the curriculum, graduates are necessarily performing it without proper training, whether we acknowledge this fact or not. In 2019, we need to ask ourselves what has improved or gone wrong, and how to change the interpreting community's perspective regarding common myths, fallacies and dichotomous thinking (on both retour and the professionals who teach it), in order to make our learning surroundings a more critical and ethical environment.

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