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The Empowerment of the (Community) Interpreter: The Right to Speak with a Voice of One's Own

Basics

The (community) interpreter is an expert for intercultural communication¹. Responsible for the communication between two or more persons from two or more cultures. Active in and between two or more cultures. Enabling and establishing communication in the 'field'. A 'fieldworker'. The analogy to ethnography is a conscious choice.

The (community) interpreting-researcher is an expert for the communication between the praxis of interpreting and the theories of interpreting. Responsible for the communication of the feedback from those doing the 'fieldwork' to those theorizing on the 'fieldwork'. Active in and between theory and practice. A theorist of fieldwork. Analogously to an anthropologist.

In my paper I take a minimal basis of situational factors and professional standards for granted. Though I am quite aware that the ideal image of the interpreter as invisible and transparent agent still underlies most projects of professionalization in many cultures, I want to resist. In this sense my paper is a modest attempt to resist homogenizing and simplifying tendencies in handling the ethics of interpreting and of doing research on interpreting. On the one hand I will very shortly hint at a parallel with the professional work performed and the cultural and social space occupied by fieldworkers and theorists of fieldwork in anthropology. On the other hand there will be the interposition of an interpreter's voice 'from the field', mixed with my own, i.e. the interpreting researcher's voice. I will present parts from one of the interviews I carried out in 1998 with semi-professional interpreters of the medical interpreter project at the university hospital Eppendorf in Hamburg-Germany². The passages to follow are taken out of an interview with a Kurdish-Turkish interpreter, a woman of Kurdish parents from Turkey, brought up in Germany. My aim is to present the fragments out of this so-called indepth interview as dialogue. It is my reading of these interviews where the reflection on the data is deliberately unfinished and in progress. Robert N. Bellah speaks in the foreword to Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* of the anthropologists's "emotional honesty" and puts forward that "knowing in the human studies is always emotional and moral as well as intellectual" (Rabinow 1977: xi). The following second quote from Bellah is very much related to my own position while studying the activities of community interpreters with the aim of getting insights for professional, i.e. ethical standards of behaviour and of training: „What is dangerous is not the presence of value judgements [...] but

¹ Cf. Göhring 1976, 1978, 1980, 1998; Vermeer 1985, 1990, 1996; Ammann 1995; Witte 2000.

² The evaluation of these interviews constitute one part of my PhD thesis.

only those judgements that remain beyond the reach of critical reflection and are not subject to revision in the light of experience.“ (1977: xi-xii)

(Community) Interpreters Enabling (Intercultural) Communication

Both community interpreting in the field and community interpreting research on the field are engaged in a process of communication – the communication of culture-specific so-called facts, of information related to a specific setting or matter, of so-called data about a specific topic, person, event. It is a communication between two or more parties and of ‘things’ that an ‘I’ has heard and understood, thus appropriated. Chang, eagerly engaged in deconstructing communication in his book with the very same title, suggests with a view to Derrida that “communication [...] implies noncomprehension, for I am most firmly placed in a situation of communication with the other only when I recognize that someone has come to me but do not understand why and do not quite understand what he, she or it says“ (1996:225). I really do not want to enter the details of philosophical discussion here. Still I cannot prevent myself from attempting to ‘communicate to you’ how much this deconstructive twist-like movement opens a way for us to see how the very down-to-earth activity of interpreting, which starts the moment when interaction partners realize that there is no possibility of communication, can reveal itself to be the only communication possible. Let me quote Chang once more, without dwelling too much on the philosophical implications: “It is this sense of apprehension or uncertainty about what is to unfold and the subsequent noncomprehension of what is unfolding that open the space of communication from which it is always too late for one to retreat [...] Communication can actually take place when it *appears not to take place*, and it can appear to take place when actually it fails to begin“ (ibid.) The most radical conclusion Chang reaches in his deconstruction of communication is the Derridaesque situation that “the impossibility of communication is the birth to its possibility“ (ibid.). This situation is the starting point for interpreting. The judgement by Chang that “communication cannot not take place“ (227) reminds me of the Watzlawickian conviction that we cannot not communicate – and of the German translation studies scholar and cultural anthropologist Göhring (1998) who takes this view as the basis for his concept of a translator as intercultural mediator. So interpreting comes in at that very point of a so-called communication breakdown which according to this line of thought is exactly the moment when communication starts. This is a twisted way of thinking. The purpose of this reflection is to think deviantly for a moment. To move this deviant thinking even further Bhabha’s concept of “Culture’s In-Between“ (1996) can be made use of as basis for the designation of the socio-cultural space the interpreter occupies when she performs her activity. Another concept I benefit from is Zygmunt Bauman’s stranger (1991, 1997) based on Georg Simmel’s *Fremder* who occupies a position distant and near at the same time (1999 [1908]: 764-768). Simmel ascribes a special kind of “objectivity“ to the stranger: This is not at all not-participation, he assures us, but a positively specific kind of participation that can be traced back to the stranger’s belonging neither to the group he enters nor the one he has left (767). Simmel’s stranger comes today and stays tomorrow – as stranger (764). The (community) interpreter intrudes into the communication situation as a Simmelian stranger and stays there.

I think that both the identity of the (community) interpreter and of the (community) interpreting-researcher can be depicted very suitably as Simmel’s stranger in Bhabha’s in-between cultural and professional space. What my informants said about their professional and cultural position can be linked to such a frame of reference. I am quite aware of how possessive it sounds when I

call the interpreters with whom I had spoken ‘my informants’. Yet it is true that in the context of my research on and my presentation of their voices here in this setting, they inevitably become my informants as it is the case with any ethnographer or any other social scientist involved in fieldwork. Here I have to mention Rabinow’s reflections on his partly problematic relationship with his informants and on the dialectics that determines the fieldwork: The anthropologist enters into the field with his views, is changed by the contacts, but also changes the persons he is contact with, because by speaking with him about their world they have to learn to “objectify“, to situate historically, to communicate their experiences (1977:39, 118-119, 162). For Göhring the fieldworker by way of appropriating a new culture is at the same time appropriated by it (1977:11). Having access to this other world in the course of fieldwork, does not only means that the ethnographer develops a certain understanding: With the possession of the new situation, a new kind of ethnocentrism emerges. A schizophrenic situation of inescapable assimilations and filterings, a very “vulnerable“ project as Dwyer puts it (1979:205). “[...] whether he wants or not – and this does not depend on a decision of his part – the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them. This necessity is irreducible,“ judges Derrida (1990:282). There is no other alternative than embracing this vulnerability and accepting that interpreting and doing research on interpreting as special kinds of communication are based on the exchange of appropriations. So I will continue using the words ‘my informants’ when I present their views through the filter of my research. But what imports is the critical reflection³.

Dialogues between interpreter and interpreting-researcher

For the evaluation and presentation of the interviews I mentioned before I take Kevin Dwyer’s (1979) deliberations on the dialogic element in the presentation of fieldwork accounts as starting point. Thus my voice as interpreting-researcher is clearly heard in the dialogue. I take very seriously the advise of the critical anthropologist saying that the only legitimized and ethical way of doing and writing research on the Other is by inscribing oneself in the text, by rejecting a clear-cut borderline between the interpreting and analyzing self of the researcher and the observed, described, thus textualized Other⁴. As I think that it is necessary to expand the “experimental moment in the human sciences“ (cf. Marcus+Fischer 1986) to interpreting studies, in my research project the interviews with interpreters are more ‘staged’ than presented⁵. I defend the view that a more engaged and participating look at the ‘fieldwork’ of community interpreting would lead us to a path out of endless discussions on neutrality and objectivity and to a rereading/rewriting of strict monolithic ethical rules⁶.

So what about the doctors at the hospital, do they respect you? Are they content that you come and help them to communicate with the patient?

Even when you work as an interpreter in a medical interpreting service which is integrated to the hospital it is not a guarantee that doctors know how an interpreter-mediated-session would look like...One doctor continued to tell something to the patient, without even taking notice of me, very fast, ... wanted the patient to sit behind a piece of equipment, began to explain, with his back turned to me...I interfered, saying, he does not understand. The doctor said, doesn’t matter for me, I haven’t asked you to come, and was very

³ My interviews with the interpreters did not take place in a neutral communication situation. I would like to summarize my view of so-called indepth interviews as dynamic and imbalanced dialogues with Spivak’s words: „, The idea of a neutral dialogue is an idea which denies history, denies structure, denies the positioning of subjects.“ (1990: 72)

⁴ Cf. Amborn 1993, Fichte 1976/1988; Leiris 1950/1985, Clifford/Marcus 1986, Clifford 1988, Häusler 1999.

⁵ Cf. Turner’s idea of social drama and the enactment of experience as the only way to comprehend, 1995: 10-14, 17-19, 26-27.

⁶ The interviews were originally conducted in German. The passages of the interview I would like to ‘stage’ here are my translations into English.

harsh to the patient...I protested and said that he could not behave like this in my presence. He did not want me to be there during the examination of the patient, told me that he could only accept me to interpret afterwards, that I should wait outside. I did not accept...I went to his superior to submit my complaint...

Not only my informants' experiences show that it is an illusion to expect from the interpreter to be as invisible as possible. Cecilia Wadensjö's studies (1998a+b) for example provide an empirical basis for the nonpossibility for interpreters to be nonpersons, very simply due to their being physically there. Even when the interpreter is physically put into brackets by interpreting simultaneously out of a booth, a last remnant of hers, her voice will remain, unremovably.

Along with the ideal of invisibility, there is also the myth of complete mutual comprehension in non-interpreter-mediated-situations. In a rather unnoticed article, two German psychiatrists, Michael Knoll and Friedhelm Röder (1988), astonishingly enough, refer to the German translation theorist Vermeer (1985) in their need to find an explanation for the dynamics in the interpreter-mediated doctor-patient-talk: They defend the view that any interpreting takes place in a specific situational context, in a cultural setting. Any conversion, then, whether between two or more parties, whether in a mono- or multicultural setting, is based on the pragmatic ground of common action, not 'real comprehension'. The interaction partners involved create the communication situation, what then looks as if they would understand each other. There is no other choice than agreeing with Vermeer's demand for an intercultural interpretive translation of all action that takes place during the translation situation. (Knoll+Röder 1988:114; cf also Vermeer 1985).

So the desire to turn off the voices of the interpreters in apprehension that communication is corrupted and comprehension inhibited is a nonfunctional one. But interpreters often cannot trust in the strength of their voices. Most of the interpreters I talked with reflected deeply and honestly upon their ambivalent position during the process of exchanging views with me. They started by telling me that they always pay great attention to interpret as literally as possible and that they do not interfere, that they just interpret. My 'reading' of these interviews illustrates that reflecting on ethical constraints opens up to the following dichotomy: The interpreters repeat the illusory expectation of remaining an outsider, while trying to be as 'competent' as an insider. When narrating their experiences however, the interpreters recognize that they interpret by taking part in the communication as 'third party', that they represent a third culture in-between in Bhabha's terms. The discussions on single cases and experiences lead to the point where both they and me can see that they adopt different translation strategies according to the setting, the interaction partners, the aim - the skopos, to speak in Vermeer's terminology.

What about ethics in this job? When operates something like an ethics of this profession? What would you define as ethical behaviour? I would much appreciate if you could again narrate an incident, a lived experience...

Once I got the commission to interpret in the clinic for children and youth psychiatry. When I arrived I recognized that I knew the young man from my job in social work. I first wanted a briefing with the psychiatrist, told him that I wanted to ask the young man whether he wants me to interpret for him. The doctor consented, I asked the patient who then wanted me to be his interpreter... Then during the interpretation ... for 6 months during therapy, once a week, before and after the meeting, I had briefs with the doctor, because the psychiatrist recognized that sometimes he could not understand cultural information ...O.k. as it's psychiatry, I reassured the psychiatrist that I would try to convey everything „word by word“, but that some information will not be open for him, he should ask, so we should speak after each session...he accepted and benefited a lot from that...family affairs, political situation, regional matters [...]...I always said that I would interpret everything...I would not accept doctors tell me, please make a summary of what the patient says... [...]

You said before that emotionally it was too much for you to interpret in refugee hearings, that you took too much emotional load with you home, that you could not stand the descriptions of torture happening in the region your family comes from...then you mentioned the special interrogation techniques the judges used: how they asked...yes, I as a student of law could see that he asks questions to which he gets the answers he expects... a layman cannot see this...I did not translate the questions as diffuse and crosswise as the judge asked them, not because I wanted to change the course and result of the hearings, but because I was convinced that the refugee should have the right to understand what was meant... You took the freedom and responsibility to change the pitfalls? So you were not eager to interpret word by word as usual? ...In this case I from the beginning told the judge that I would not interpret word by word but the sense of what he is going to ask...the judge consented...But now I very consciously refuse to interpret in these areas, because I see no sense in this kind of hearing...I cannot interpret the way the questions are asked. I cannot interpret as I do in the hospital... You changed your way of interpreting then? [...] Why? And for the interest of whom? ...Oh, certainly for the interest of the refugee in these hearings...So what do you think about the loyalty of the interpreter, as the person enabling communication, bringing together two cultures? ... In the hospital there is no real loyalty that binds me, to nobody...So what is the aim of interpreting then?...Well, that the patient knows everything about his illness, that he is informed and heard... but in hearings it's different, it has to be different...because there is somebody exerting power on somebody...yes, that's the reason... [...]

In social settings, I made the experience that if I as an interpreter without an accent, with knowledge about the situation, if I went with people, the financial help situation was different, the social workers allowed them access to more support, not necessarily because they were unfriendly to foreigners, but because I knew that social workers only work when you ask them to do so and when you know how to ask what. I did exactly this...*So this means, in social settings you took the initiative for the migrant. You did not wait until the migrant asked but you asked for them* ..Yes, of course, because that was the reason why they came to me and wanted me to come along as interpreter...

The Voice at the End

The interpreters of the medical interpreter project in Hamburg are seen and define themselves as semi-professionals. But their aim is to become full professionals, to have access to further training and specialization, to be acknowledged and paid as professionals. They have models and standards in mind, imposed upon them from outside and internalized by them as their own desired profile. These standards and norms are largely affected by the myths about the identity of an interpreter, especially in the conference setting. So they repeat the requirement to interpret everything, to only interpret, to be interpreter and nothing else, to be detached, in order to be able to perform their task from a neutral and unbiased position, in an objective manner. But digging into their experiences and critical interpreting instances opens up a picture where the activities of the interpreters become much more complex. Reductionist ethical rules are abandoned, in most cases unconsciously. They interpret with specific aims in mind, for specific persons and in accordance with the conditions of the communication situation. It was just one voice, a very short passage out of one interview that I could present here. Yet it was sufficient to see how idle theoretical discussions on professional standards in community interpreting and interpreting in general often are. A more flexible, dynamic and situation-oriented approach to the position and role of the interpreter and the activities they perform is required. It is time to close the period of interpreters feeling guilty of their visibility and being traumatized by the fear of taking the initiative or of resisting. Referring to my analogy to the fieldworker and the theorist of fieldwork at the beginning, it is also time to see that a re-reading of the community interpreting praxis involves the empowerment of both the community interpreter and the community interpreting researcher.

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