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Executive summary

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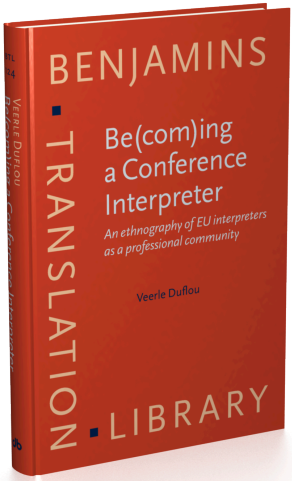

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Be(com)ing a Conference Interpreter: An ethnography of EU interpreters as a professional community
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Executive summary

Based on a 4-year ethnographic study of conference interpreters working for the EU institutions' interpreting services conducted between 2007 and 2011, this book describes conference interpreting as a practice, that is, the 'lived work' (Clancey 2006) of professionals. This approach builds on the idea that conference interpreters do not perform their job in isolation, but in a team with colleagues and in a wider social and organizational framework which shapes the conditions under which they work and the professional requirements put upon them. Its attention to the social and institutional embedding of conference interpreting also reflects recent developments in Translation Studies. These have resulted in an increased focus on interpreters as social agents and a new openness to interdisciplinary research (Pöchhacker 2009). The study was motivated by the gap that interpreter trainers and institutional recruiters observe between, on the one hand, the level of competence acquired by graduates who are successful in EU accreditation tests and, on the other hand, that which is needed to perform adequately in EU interpreting assignments.

Drawing on documentary evidence, interview data and field notes resulting from observant participation of Dutch, English and Polish booth interpreters working for the interpreting services of the European Commission (DG SCIC) and the European Parliament (DG INTE), the book first describes how EU interpreters are employed by the interpreting DGs of the European Commission and the European Parliament in a highly institutionalized and complex environment. It demonstrates that, although they are divided into various subgroups along organizational (DG SCIC vs. DG INTE), administrative (ACIs/freelancers vs. officials) and linguistic (based on A-language) lines, the specific characteristics of their work context define them as a community of practice (Wenger 1998) with a joint professional mission. Both gate-keeping (accreditation tests and staff competitions) and quality standards are shown to be mainly managed by members of the community itself.

Subsequently, a series of major distinctive features of EU interpreting work and their implications for the knowledge and skills required of practitioners are discussed. First, as a result of the EU's policy of multilingualism, large language regimes are common in EU meetings. As these involve extensive recourse to retour and relay interpreting, insight in the implications of the information provided on the team sheet and proficiency in the interaction with the simultaneous interpreting equipment are indispensable for interpreters. Second, meeting types and subject fields vary across space (i.e. the working places and buildings of the various institutions served by the EU interpreting services) and time (i.e. according to institutional cycles). Under these conditions, it is essential not only to acquire familiarity with the material context, but

also to develop the ability to recognize the links between the spatio-temporal situation and the characteristics of interpreting assignments. Third, within meetings, several meeting activities can be distinguished, each of them associated with specific types of interaction and discourse. For EU interpreters it is essential to be able to understand the implications of the meeting agenda, i.e. to link agenda items to various meeting activities in order to gauge the characteristics of the interpreting assignment. Fourth, both interpreting services have developed an array of dedicated ICT tools for advance consultation of meeting documents, terminology research, etc., which EU interpreters need to master.

By examining the ways the EU interpreting DGs define categories of interpreter employees as 'beginners' and 'newcomers' and how the DGs regulate such employees' eligibility for specific support measures, the study reveals how formal and informal arrangements contribute to creating or restricting individuals' opportunities for situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Drawing on interview and observational data reflecting differences in the skills and knowledge of beginning and experienced interpreters, it argues that interpreting competence is situated (i.e. bounded to a specific working context) and includes not only cognitive, but also embodied and social components. An examination of the opportunities for learning offered by participation in the practice shows that, for EU interpreters, situated learning is a necessary complement to formal conference interpreting training in that it allows them to become familiar with the shared repertoire of knowledge and skills required to cope with their task.

Finally, the study demonstrates how the multidimensional concept of competence which emerges from a practice view contributes to a better understanding of the problems beginning interpreters face. A multimodal analysis of the way *on-mic* work is distributed among boothmates in a sample of EU meetings shows how Dutch booth interpreters draw on a complex of cognitive, social and embodied skills in order to apply shared professional and moral values in the course of an assignment.