

Preface

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**Self-Preservation in Simultaneous Interpreting: Surviving
the role**

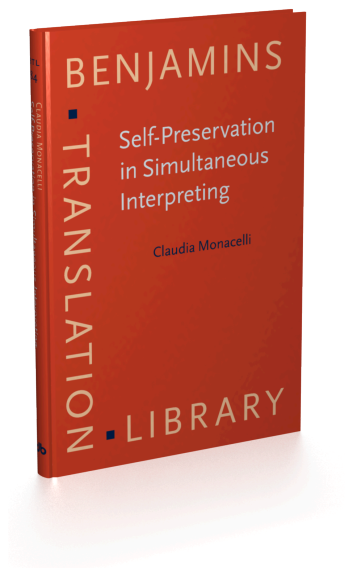
Claudia Monacelli

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Preface

Sometimes conference interpreting is considered to be an expensive luxury. The interpreters, it is argued, often perform a service for only a handful of listeners and, these days, everyone should understand English. At the same time they may be seen as semi-automatons, a kind of translating machine performing no more than an automatic transfer process. And when things go wrong and misunderstandings or even diplomatic incidents occur, it is they who get the blame.

The physical conditions in which simultaneous conference interpreters work have no doubt contributed to a widespread impression of remoteness and automatism as characteristic of their work. In the classic conference setting, the interpreter is literally invisible – placed in a soundproof, glass-fronted booth usually orthogonal to or directly behind the sightlines of the receivers of their output. Their voice is heard solely through headphones, disembodied as it were and yet connected in some mysterious way (for the layperson) to what is going on before participants' eyes. The linkage of the interpreters' voice to the ebb and flow of the voice of the speaker who holds the floor, such that pauses, emphases, resumptions and so on are reflected, some seconds later, in the interpreter's output, reinforces an impression that some kind of automatic process is at work. At the same time, especially for those who, having no knowledge of the source language, rely on their interpreters for comprehension of what is being said, there is a magical element, akin to that experienced when witnessing real-time machine translation: just how does it all happen?

Little wonder then that early investigations of the conference interpreter sought to shed light on how this process takes place and more specifically on mental processing: how does the interpreter divide attention between competing stimuli? What is the role of short-term memory? How does “chunking” take place? How do interpreters monitor their output at the same time as processing new input? Is meaning “de-verbalised” in the translation process? Psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic questions such as these generated a fascinating body of research, involving a good deal of empirical experiment and leading to real insights into interpreters' practices and processes. Many of these findings also found their way into training programmes, by way of advice on pausing, on “ear-voice span”/“*décalage*”, on the advisability, for example, of shadowing as a training exercise and so on.

Typically though, the subject of the research was “the interpreter” – as an entity rather than as a person. Research data were quite often assumed to represent “interpreting” in general and “the interpreter” as a unified phenomenon. The interpreter’s mind was the focus of attention while contextual factors such as personality, concern for quality, responsiveness to criticism or coping with special situations such as a chairperson interrupting or speaking at the same time as a speech-maker tended to be seen as unhelpful distractions. Indeed, it is fair to say that simultaneous interpreting research has been dominated by studies of cognition and of response to stimuli from its beginnings in the 1950s until quite recently. By contrast, when scholars from the late 1970s onwards began to investigate the activity variously known as community, public service or liaison interpreting, they naturally focused on the salient contextual features of the event: face-to-face interaction, dialogue and a three-party negotiation of turn taking in spontaneous interaction. It soon became apparent that interpreters were full participants in the events in which they acted, that they had their own goals and that their decision making could lead in a variety of different directions, influencing the outcome of the event. Context, in these studies, was now very much to the fore. Indeed, research in community interpreting now regards the interpreter as a social being, in a social context, with wants, desires, needs and instinctive reactions and so on in addition to the institutional goals they seek to serve.

For a while it seemed as if these very different types of interpreting – conference and community, as they were most commonly called – lent themselves to wholly different research questions and forms of investigation. It was not until Ebru Diriker’s ethnographic study of 2001, published in 2004 as *De-/Re-Contextualising Simultaneous Interpreting*, that attention was systematically drawn to the professional conference interpreter as a person in a context, actively involved in what is going on, speaking on their own behalf as well as on behalf of those they translate. Now at last evidence is emerging of interpreters not merely fulfilling a normative role, that of automatically and neutrally representing another’s talk, but also reflecting and representing their own selves.

It is within this general perspective that Claudia Monacelli’s new book considers simultaneous conference interpreters’ activity. With her many years of experience as a practising interpreter, she starts from the observation that conference interpreters tend to see survival as being their primary objective. Now what does ‘survival’ mean in the context of simultaneous interpreting? The image of the tightrope walker has sometimes been used as a graphic illustration of the interpreter’s balancing act. Compelled to move forwards at a pace set by someone else, they maintain equilibrium as best they may, compensating for pressures and surges that might push them into the void. The author describes this activity in terms of the theory of self-regulation, a phenomenon observed throughout the natural

world. Operating as a closed system, organisms counteract threats to their own stability by deploying their resources in a self-regulating way. This book provides a detailed account of self-regulation as theorised by scholars in other branches of science, and then shows how it operates in simultaneous interpreting.

For, as the author shows, it is in the nature of conference interpreting that the activity itself is constantly face-threatening – to all concerned, including the interpreter. Performance is at all times held up to scrutiny and yet decision-making must be immediate: there is always a feeling of “it’s now or never: there will be no second chance”. It is interpreters’ awareness of this that naturally induces them to seek what the author calls “dynamic equilibrium”, a constantly evolving state in which problems are resolved and pressures compensated for in the interests of maintaining the integrity of the system as a whole.

In this book, Claudia Monacelli does not seek to show that interpreters occasionally step out of line by intervening in the communication process. Rather, by taking as her starting point the more visible interventions interpreters make (comments on speed of delivery, on exchanges between the chair and the floor), she is able to explore the interpreter’s instinct for self-preservation in an inherently unstable environment. She then seeks evidence in the whole fabric of their output for self-regulation as an underlying principle of interpreter behaviour. Thus she shows us how local-level choices in terms of personal reference, modality, omissions, additions and so on are related to the overriding imperative of professional survival – through face-protective mechanisms such as distancing the self from what is being talked about.

Claudia Monacelli’s book derives its credibility from the professional interpreting environment within which it is situated. The subjects – interpreters with many years of professional experience – are involved both at an initial briefing stage (in which professional norms, standards and expectations are discussed) and in a later post-performance de-briefing. In this way, the interpreter’s brain is no longer treated as an object on a laboratory table: the subjects are directly involved in the research as people with their own views and attitudes. The primary data of the study are the recorded output of these subjects at work in genuine conference settings. The author’s close acquaintance with these environments affords her a privileged perspective from which to observe interpreters’ self-regulation. As a professional interpreter of many years’ standing she provides in *Self-preservation in simultaneous interpreting: Surviving the role* an insightful and refreshing account of interpreters’ behaviour from the other side of the glass-fronted booth.

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