

Towards a Dynamic Role Model of Liaison Interpreters: self-descriptions of practitioners in Estonia

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ABSTRACT

In 2003-2006, a study on the evolving role model of liaison interpreters in Estonia was carried out (Mullamaa 2005; Mullamaa 2006a). The study offered insights into a specific translation culture (Prunč 1997) and illuminated how a professional role is developing in tandem with socio-political and economic changes. The study specifically shed light on the way interpreters view their role a) against the background of working in a totalitarian regime, b) at the beginning of the independence period of a small state, and c) through the different developing stages of democratic evolution and the rising market economy. The results suggest that the 16-year time-span in Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union has offered favourable conditions for the development of some principles and strategies that might not have been possible in a more ideologically dogmatic political climate. I applied the methodological framework of ethnography and the principles of chaining; 14 practitioners were identified and interviewed. I analyzed the transcripts and looked at 217 excerpts in which practicing liaison interpreters describe their role. This article sums up the main results of the study.

KEYWORDS: liaison interpreting, ethics and neutrality, political and socio-cultural context, Codes of professional practice, Code of ethics, professional roles, interpreter interaction, Code model vs. dialogism, transition societies, Estonia.

Introduction

The context and aim of the research

Traditionally, Translation Studies (TS) has analyzed texts or *the translator* as an anonymous, abstract tool for producing texts (Pym 2004). This has also been the case in Interpreting Studies (IS). Today, researchers of translation processes have become interested in the way socio-cultural, ideological and political dimensions shape the identities and interactions of translators and interpreters.

Many of the more recent sociologically-inclined studies within IS tend to focus on transcripts from the interpreting situation (cf. Wadensjö 1992; Pöllabauer 2006). Some later studies focus on interpreters' views (e.g. Wadensjö 1998, 2001; Pöchhacker 2000). Tate and Turner (1997/2002) present hypothetical problematic interpreting situations to interpreters and ask how they *would have* acted. Angelelli (2004) administers a questionnaire to interpreters in North America, the results of which allow her to explicitly focus on their 'visibility', that is, on how interpreters participate in the communication triad. Diriker (2004) and Vik-Tuovinen (2006) bring us closer to understanding the role of interpreters by drawing on sociological perspectives. However, there are still relatively few studies where *interpreters themselves* present their views on how they perceive their role in order to specify the most important and problematic aspects of the profession. In this study, they are given the very opportunity to do so. This article sums up some of the key results which emerge from this study.

This research focuses on the role of liaison interpreters in Estonia. I believe that Estonia offers a good example of the effects of social change in a post-soviet transition society. Many changes have occurred since Estonia regained its independence in 1991. The political and

economic situation has changed considerably, as has the structure of the economy. Increasing democratization and individualization in personal and professional life as well as changing value orientations have become important (cf. Kalmus and Vihalemm 2004: 41; Mullamaa 2004, 2006b).

During the time of the Soviet Union, foreign visits into the country were strictly state-controlled; the few interpreting assignments that existed were mainly in the field of conference and diplomatic interpreting. The beginning of the 1990s witnessed the influx of foreign delegations to establish relations between state representatives in Estonia and the West. Business relations, too, developed, and so did private contacts, which were often initiated and encouraged at the local community level (e.g. in the framework of twin-town cooperation). In the very beginning, however, not everyone in the sovietized country spoke a foreign language.¹ Thus, more interpreter support was needed; interpreter training courses were initiated in the beginning of the 1990s and they mainly focused on training conference interpreters (Tamm 2001).

But what are the interpreter training programs like today? I reviewed official training courses in Estonia. The results showed that they are still mainly directed at interpreters for the conference interpreting domain. They follow the Euromasters program and aim at educating interpreters mainly for the institutions of the European Union.² Liaison interpreting – i.e. interpreting which usually entails working in both language directions, is generally characterized by shorter speaking turns of participants and a smaller number of participants and the level of formality may differ – is not mentioned in these programs. There is no specific information on the liaison mode of interpreting on the website of the Estonian Association of Translators and Interpreters.³ In my study, I wished to address this gap. Specifically, I wanted to find answers to the following questions:

- 1) Is liaison interpreting practiced in Estonia?
- 2) What are the modalities of this mode of interpreting according to the practitioners?
- 3) What do self-descriptions of practising liaison interpreters in Estonia tell us about their role?
- 4) By investigating liaison interpreting, what do we learn about communication during interpreting and for the role of interpreters in general?
- 5) What are the implications of this study for interpreter training?

To find answers to these five questions, I tested the following hypotheses:

- 1) The role of liaison interpreters in Estonia often entails more interaction than the so-called ‘machine’ or Code model more common in conference interpreting (cf. Linell 1997, 1998; Tate and Turner 1997/2002; Wadensjö 1998).
- 2) The suggested notions of *professional self* and *personal self* help to analyze the interpreter’s role. They can thus be introduced for theoretical and pedagogical purposes to understand and cope with the relevant role implications.

¹ Today, among people in their forties and fifties only 9% speak a foreign language other than Russian. Among those aged 20-29, 53%, and among those aged 15-19, 69% speak a foreign language other than Russian (Vihalemm et al. 2004:63).

² Cf. the homepage of the program given at Tartu University: [<http://www.fl.ut.ee/93587>] (accessed 9 November 2009).

³ [www.etil.ee] (accessed 9 November 2009).

- 3) The role of Estonian liaison interpreters as reflected in their self-descriptions has been influenced by individualization and democratization processes in the post-soviet society.

The self-descriptions of participants are inevitably influenced by the specific socio-cultural context. Nevertheless, I expect that some aspects of their role descriptions can add to the information we have about liaison interpreters around the world and will be useful for the discussion on the interpreter's role in general.

Theoretical background

Interpreting Studies and the interpreter's role

In earlier IS, interpreters were often seen as 'machines' mechanically transferring the message. This approach is now known as the machine, conduit or the Code⁴ model (cf. Wadensjö 1992). Yet, more recent research has started to point to the problems in the model. Already Anderson (1976/2002) points out that existing demands on the interpreter's role do not match the reality. He concludes that in many situations "the details" of the role of interpreter may have to be "worked out at an *ad hoc* basis" and that the role prescriptions may not always be adequate:

The interpreter's role is always partially undefined - that is, the role prescriptions are objectively inadequate. The interpreter's position is also characterized by role overload. Not only is it seldom entirely clear what he is to do, he is also frequently expected to do more than is objectively possible (1976/2002:211).

Wadensjö (1998) points to the limitations of traditionally imposed norms. Both Wadensjö (1992, 1998) and Linell (1997) demonstrate that the Code model, implying the monological approach and the strict Codes of professional conduct of interpreters, may sometimes clash with the needs of communicative situations emerging during interpreting:

Rules belong to an idealized, abstract world. They 'exist' in the minds of people. Utterances, in contrast, belong to the concrete world. An individual who is occupied with interpreting *relates* to linguistic, social and other cultural norms, but interpreting as an activity can never be a simple application of norms of grammar, generic style, politeness, and so forth. Such a view would presuppose the denial of personal responsibility (Wadensjö 1998:41).

Wadensjö (*ibid.*) argues that the dialogical model, which sees interpreters not just as mere 'conduits' but active participants in the communication and message creation, should be favoured. Linell (1997) underlines that translation and interpreting should rather be seen as socio-cultural concepts constructed in certain cultural contexts. He insists that the "normative component of notions" should not hide the diversity of situations and contexts, in which the interpreting activity occurs, and thus the dimensions these notions may have. Furthermore, established norms have a tendency to become self-fulfilling prophecy:

⁴ Today, Estonia does not have a clearly formulated Code of professional conduct as a separate document. The rules of interpreter interaction are nevertheless explicit, as presented on the homepage of the Estonian Association of Translators and Interpreters [www.etl.ee] and introduced at our interpreter training courses. Nevertheless, for the sake of brevity, I will refer to these principles as the Code model, since they bear a strong resemblance to what is referred to in Interpreting Studies (IS) as the transfer or conduit model of interpreting (cf. e.g. Tate and Turner 1997/2002; Wadensjö 1998), but which is often also seen as the prevalent conception behind many Codes of ethics or Codes of professional conduct.

Norms of (what is considered to be) correct or neutral interpreting have an impact on actual conduct. [...] Interpreters may stay close to the task of “merely” translating, but it is of course an entirely empirical question how far these norms fit actual conduct and/ or vice versa. Likewise, what kinds of variation there are among the activity types in which interpreting occurs is a matter to be empirically researched (Linell 1997:64).

Numerous later studies (cf. Katan and Straniero-Sergio 2001; Mason and Stewart 2001; Miguelez 2001; Wadensjö 2001; Kondo 2003) have elaborated on aspects of interpreter interaction. The role being dynamic has become especially important in ethical situations. The tasks and boundaries of the role as passed on in training and enforced through the Code seem to determine in detail the latitude in which we operate. Yet, this may not always suffice. An illustration of some dilemmas involved is the focus of a study by Tate and Turner (1997/2002), which gives empirical evidence of how the interpreters’ perception of their role influences interpreting practice and, through this, the interpreted events. The study illustrates the negligence of some interpreters’ ethical and moral duties which may occur when following the “mechanistic Code model” (1997/2002:381). Tate and Turner demonstrate that a number of participants wish to follow the Code even if they are convinced that it is not ethical. They do so merely in order to follow the official norms of their Code. However, the endeavour to follow the Code may make practitioners forget some other important aspects of the specific interpreting situations. Tate and Turner express the deficiency of the mechanistic model in the following way:

The ideologically normative strength of the perspective which says that it is only proper for the interpreter to be entirely uninvolved and mechanised – facilitated by its tidy “black-and-whiteness”, the unambiguous directives for action which it conveniently supplies – has created a situation, where, we could argue, professionals in the field have been reluctant openly to look at what they know *actually* happens in many situations (1997/2002:374).

Furthermore, Katan and Straniero-Sergio (2001) argue that interpreters’ comfort and ease to comply with the commission and to sense the atmosphere of interpreting situations are highly valued by the audience. Angelelli (2004) underlines the aspect of interpreter visibility. Cronin (2002) holds that interpreters have ethical responsibilities as individuals *above* their professional roles. Jones (2004) stresses that important aspects to be considered include “the translator’s own psyche, personal history and motivations, political and ideological loyalties and views, ethical principles, and conceptualizations of his/her own role” (2004:10).

The individual and society – our professional roles and provisional selves

To understand the performance of an individual in society in general and the performance of a definite role more specifically, let us take a look at how sociologists analyze professional roles. Goffman (1959) points to practitioners’ inclination to create a *front* and image to which we tend to stick. He points to the dimensions of *front*, *appearance*, and *manner*. Goffman defines *front* as “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (1959:22). *Appearance* and *manner* are then “the stimuli which make up personal front” (*ibid.*).

Inspired by Goffman (1959), I suggest that the notions of *professional self* and *personal self* could be introduced to analyze the interpreter’s role. The notion of *professional self* could then cover the dimensions of professional *front*, *manner* and *performance*. *Personal self*

would refer to the interpreters' self: their work principles, background, ethics, ideology and values (cf. also Jones 2004).

Previously, interpreter training and research focused primarily on the *professional self*. Only recently, scholars have begun to recognise and study what could be called the *personal self* in the interpreter's role. I suggest that the notions of *professional self* and *personal self* – including Goffman's (1959) concepts of *performance*, *front* and *manner* – could be one way of reconciling the possible conflicts between one's self and one's official role, in order to maintain professional integrity. This kind of preparatory framework could potentially also provide support in the decision-making process in situations where a contradiction between *professional self* and *personal self* may be felt, for example in situations of great ethical weight.

At the same time, it is important to stress that our professional identities need not be stable and rule-bound. In line with personal and professional maturation, as well as changes in the immediate (e.g. work-place) and broader environment (e.g. the socio-cultural and/or the political-ideological context), the aspects which are considered to be of primary importance in a profession may change. Ibarra demonstrates how *provisional selves* are used for experimenting with and for gradual adaptation to new roles, suggesting that “identity changes accompany work role changes” (1999:1). According to her, people develop *provisional selves* which they test “by experimenting with images that serve as trials for possible but not yet fully elaborated professional identities” (1999:3). The *provisional selves* serve as “temporary solutions people use to bridge the gap between their current capacities and self-conceptions and the representations they hold about what attitudes and behaviours are expected in the new role” (*ibid.*).

Even though Ibarra focuses her research on newcomers to firms and the “transition to more senior positions” (*ibid.*), it is reasonable to suggest that similar changes and adaptations take place in professional life in general. Identity changes are also demonstrated to be closely related to changes in the environment. As shown above, Estonia as a post-soviet country has undergone many changes during the 18 years since regaining independence. If some adaptations have occurred in the role of interpreters in Estonia, these could – at least to some extent – be attributed to similar processes.

Methods

Ethnography

Our research follows the principles of ethnographic research. According to Nunan, ethnographic research can be characterised as follows:

The research takes place in context, with an attempt to minimize the disruption caused by the researcher's intrusion. The researcher does not attempt to control or manipulate the phenomena under investigation. The research is relatively long-term [...]. It entails the collaborative involvement of several participants [...]; generalisations and hypotheses often emerge during the course of the investigation, rather than beforehand (1992:56).

The definitions below underline the descriptive and interpretive character of ethnography:

Ethnography is a method of studying and learning about a person or group of people. Typically, ethnography involves the study of a small group of subjects in their own environment. Rather than looking at a small set of variables and a large number of subjects (“the big picture”), the ethnographer attempts to get a detailed

understanding of the circumstances of the few subjects being studied. Ethnographic accounts, then, are both descriptive and interpretive; descriptive, because detail is so crucial, and interpretive, because the ethnographer must determine the significance of what she observes without gathering broad, statistical information.⁵

One can distinguish between macro-ethnography and micro-ethnography. Macro-ethnography focuses on carrying out research on “broadly-defined cultural groupings, such as ‘the English’ or ‘New Yorkers.’” Micro-ethnography focuses on studying “narrowly-defined cultural groupings, such as ‘local government GIS specialists’ or ‘members of Congress’”⁶ – or possibly – liaison interpreters in a small country.

Ethnography has often been seen to be in a binary relationship with psychometric research. Indeed, not only methods, but even the very assumptions and ways of interpreting evidence of these two approaches differ:

In psychometric research, the research questions are formulated as hypotheses, and the constructs are operationalised in advance of the data collection phase. In ethnography, on the other hand, there is an attempt to remain as open minded as possible, and there is an interaction between questions and data [...] (Nunan 1992:69).

LeCompte and Goertz (1984:32) see the differences as advantageous for ethnographic approach:

Ethnographic research differs from positivistic research, and its contributions to scientific progress lie in such differences. These may involve the data gathering that necessarily precedes hypothesis formulation and revision or may focus on descriptive investigation and analysis. By admitting into the research frame the subjective experiences of both participants and investigator, ethnography may provide a depth of understanding lacking in other approaches to investigation (1984:32).

Appreciating the potential in the method I decided to use ethnography despite its challenges.

The methodology of our research

In 2003-2004, I conducted seven preliminary interviews with people working in intercultural mediation, including interpreting, translation, tour guiding, teaching foreign languages, to find out, if they also deal with liaison interpreting. The results convinced me to continue research on the issue and provided insights for working out the initial questionnaire and the in-depth interview questions.

Since there is currently no organization representing liaison interpreters in Estonia, the next task was to locate more practitioners working in this mode. I firstly approached professional organizations involved in cross-cultural mediation, such as unions of tour guides and unions

⁵ Principles for ethnographic research: glossary. [http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/glossary/ethnography.html] (last accessed 1 September 2007).

⁶ Principles for ethnographic research: [http://www2.chass.ncsu.edu/garson/pa765/ethno.htm] (accessed 9 November 2009).

of teachers of foreign languages. Secondly, I applied the method of chaining which entails asking practitioners and clients to recommend other practicing liaison interpreters.

Eventually, fourteen practitioners were identified, who were prepared to analyze their work in a recorded interview.⁷ The fourteen in-depth semi-structured interviews⁸ constitute the bulk of the research material. The interviews were carried out following the principles of convergent interviewing,⁹ where the interviewees are encouraged to freely expand on the matter of discussion with minimal intrusion by the interviewer. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in line with the principles of ethnography. The average duration of an interview was 90 minutes (including the greetings, the warm-up, and the questions by the interviewee). The average duration of recorded time was 45 minutes. All recordings were made with the participant's permission. The recordings were made with a Panasonic microcassette recorder (Model RN-502) on 60-minute Sony microcassettes. At the final stage in our research a year after the interviews, the informants received a follow-up questionnaire by email. This yielded eight responses. Thus, the overall research process can be summarized in the following three stages:

1. 2003-2004: seven preliminary interviews and five questionnaires
2. 2005-2006: fourteen in-depth interviews
3. 2006: eight follow-up questionnaires

The age of participants ranged between twenty-six and sixty. The majority of the participants worked in both conference and liaison interpreting. Most of them, however, preferred to work in the liaison mode. Eleven participants spoke Estonian as their mother tongue, two spoke Russian, and one spoke Finnish. The language at home and at work was Estonian for all of them. Participants worked with the language pairs of Estonian and Danish, English, Finnish, German, Norwegian, Russian, or Swedish.

The participants generally worked for the higher socio-economic brackets, as they were relatively well paid. They were mostly women and had all graduated from a higher educational establishment. Many had another full-time or free-lance job. The documentation of this new niche – the field of liaison interpreting – on the market comes at an interesting time, as professionalization and unionization are on the increase in Estonia. National standards are thus being worked out for professions such as tour guides, teachers, pharmacists, and many others. I believe that for developing such standards for interpreters it is important to understand their different modes, the conference and the liaison one, and their different modalities.

⁷ Fourteen is a small number. However, considering the population of Estonia (1.3 million people of whom one million are native Estonian speakers) and the amount of people engaged in professional associations related to intercultural communication, it appears not unreasonable to suggest that we may have conducted interviews with a considerable proportion of the most active practitioners of liaison interpreting. The exact number of practitioners in the field is unknown, but the chaining method showed that after the eighth participant, participants began referring back to practitioners we had already interviewed.

⁸ A semi-structured interview is a mixture of closed and open questions, enabling the researcher to obtain free and creative responses. According to Nunan, it is “likely that responses to open questions will more accurately reflect what the respondent wants to say” and “can thus better elicit the responses from the participants – even though responses to closed questions are easier to collate and analyse” (1992:28).

⁹ Cf. principles for carrying out ethnographic research: convergent interviewing: [<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/iview.html>] (last accessed 9 November 2009).

Altogether I analyzed 217 excerpts and examples from the interviews and questionnaires. I used convergent interviewing, where the principles of keeping the interviewee talking include ‘pregnant pauses’ or non-committal encouraging sounds, as well as gestures and facial expressions that were not captured on the tape-recorder. One of the first methodological problems encountered was therefore the making of the transcripts. Even more challenging was translating the participants’ extremely colloquial and elliptical Estonian utterances into English. It was a challenge to render instances in which the word choice in the original seemed to have made the participant ponder upon it, pause, and/or start again. Anacolutha posed a very similar problem. The solution was to go for the idiomatic, when the actual choice of words was natural in the mother tongue version, and to try to render some clumsy expressions, doubt, or lack of cohesion when this was conspicuous in the original. The transcriptions indicate longer pauses by the interviewees with the symbol “(...)”. For the sake of clarity and for reader comfort, some instances, in which the participants were looking for words or used (therefore) unidiomatic or repetitive utterances, have been cut which is indicated with the symbol “[...]”. Sentences I want to emphasize are given in **bold** and utterances emphasized by participants are given in *italics*. I use the following abbreviations: I – Interviewer, P – Participant, Q – Question.

The scope of the present article is restricted to a small selection of examples. Although this limitation does not allow my readers to participate in the analytical process as ethnographic research prescribes, I hope that the excerpts chosen help to reflect the tonality in the majority of answers to a definite question.

Results and analysis

Liaison interpreting – a domain of its own

In the research process I found a number of practicing interpreters who specialized in the liaison mode and considered it a niche in its own right. I asked the following questions:

Q1: Have you been thinking of the interpreter’s role before? How have you personally conceptualized this for yourself?

Q2: Liaison or conference interpreting - which do you specialize in? Are there any differences? If yes, what differences are there? Are there differences in your role as interpreter in these situations?

Even though Q1 and Q2 were partly warm-up questions, noticeably often the existence of what may be described as the *personal self* dimension was given as a reason for choosing to work in the liaison domain:

(1) P5: Yes. [...]...in fact **I am definitely a mediator, and I am definitely a participant in the process** - or I see it like this. **On this depends... so much.** You can’t be just someone there at the back.

Although at first tentative in their responses, after feeling more assured, participants opened up and shared their views on their role in the interpreting situation as the interview progressed. Some dichotomy can be perceived between the descriptions of one’s role in liaison as opposed to in conference interpreting:

(2) P9: But of course, when you are working in a booth at a conference [...] you are like a computer. *There you don’t have any personality to back you up.* But at a seminar ...you will have a personal relationship at once.

Interaction

With questions three and four, I wanted to find out how participants perceived and described their actual practice in interaction.

Q3: Are there any contradictions between the current rules of interpreter interaction (the Code) and real-life situations?

Q4: How would you describe your relationship with the client? Is your role just “putting the text into another language”? Something else? How do you describe it?

The interpreters mentioned that the more mature their professional as well as life experience, the more at ease they felt to coordinate interaction. Most informants held that they could help their clients better when they communicated beyond their role requirements. Our results show that many participants very actively use their personal intuitive knowledge and communication skills to guarantee understanding and interaction. It is reasonable to assume that, in this sense, their *personal* and *professional selves* can be reconciled, which in turn makes a positive impact on their willingness to work and help with communication. The tonality of the remarks can be illustrated by the excerpt below:

(3) P10: The client and the one you interpret for [...] – also they feel good in such an atmosphere [...] the quality that is there once you feel relaxed [...] – you will have an enormous inspiration, even a glow. In a word – everything succeeds.

However, there is a definite borderline interpreters may perceive in situations that confront their own ethics, political views or ideology, as is illustrated here by P4 speaking about her assignment back in the Soviet era:

(4) P4: [the client] went into such contradiction with my own beliefs and worldview [...] and then **I felt that it is me and the role**, and that I must convey exactly what he says, in words, and how he feels. But luckily ...this was [...] not so very formal, I knew the people I was interpreting for, we had a friendly relationship – and later they were just laughing telling me that my face [laughter] had been twisted in a grimace. So probably somehow, **while this was so appalling for me, it still sought its way out somehow**. Because I tried to express what he ...**but it was so much in contradiction with ...me** that it was indeed so difficult.

Participants stated that they did not always fully follow the Code model, and many of them explicitly reflected on that. Even though there lies a potential power in such mediating processes, participants stressed that they “would never misuse this” (P6). Consider also:

(5) P4: **I have never misused it!**

(6) P6: **I think they [interpreters] never misuse it. What they want is better results.**

(7) P2: **It is exactly me, who has this, this power, “it is you, who mediates” [...]... what attitude I may have when interpreting is not important. What is important is that these two people [the primary parties] understand each other.**

All interpreters agreed that it was paramount to convey the information needed to the primary parties and ensure that “communication would not be hindered” (P7, identical statements by P9, P11). Thus, an interesting new model emerges in which, on the one hand, in line with the results of many other studies in other parts of the world, the Code model is questioned (cf. Linell 1997, 1998; Tate and Turner 1997/2002; Wadensjö 1998; Pöllabauer 2006; Angelelli 2004). On the other hand, however, there is no tendency to help either the less empowered ones (e.g. immigrants, as suggested by Wadensjö 1998, 2001) or the ones in power positions (e.g. the immigration officer, as suggested by Pöllabauer 2006). Our interpreters did not attempt to be more visible than the clients (in contrast to Angelelli 2004 or Katan and Straniero-Sergio 2001) or use their power to influence either side (in contrast to Anderson 1976/2002). In almost all interviews, it was explicitly expressed that any interpreter behaviour which did not strictly follow the Code simply served to facilitate the client interaction better.

Ethics, personal and professional self

Participants mentioned stressful situations in which they felt a conflict between their professional role demands (*professional self*) and their personal beliefs (*personal self*). This closely relates to ethics. The questions posed to probe deeper into the matter were the following:

Q5: The interpreter and ethics. In your role as an interpreter, have you ever faced ethical dilemmas (e.g. when you understand that one of the parties is telling a lie)? How do you conceptualize this in relation to your role as interpreter?

Q6: The role and yourself. Have you ever felt a contradiction (e.g. very sad events)? If yes, how do you handle the situation? (neutrality, power?)

The interpreters reported that they would follow their inner morals and ethics. They said that they added comments or initiated sub-dialogues in interpreting situations in which they believed “it could be wrong or a pity if things would remain that way” (P4), if a lie was entailed (P1, P2, P5, P10, P12, P14), or if something “dear for them” was potentially misused (P7, P13):

(8) I: /.../ has there been any ethical conflict?

P7: **Yes there has!** [...]...For example, a work I have, which is [...] related to our peat industry. [...] ...**On the one hand the processing of peat-fields, mining there...selling this peat abroad. And then on the other side Estonian nature’s value or something like this. Of course this raises questions.**

or looked down upon (P1, P2, P10, P12, P13):

(9) P13: If someone would say something seriously bad about Estonia [...] which is not objective any more. **Then I feel that it would be very difficult for me to interpret this in the way it was said.** These are the things I feel repulsion for. [...] **This is the place where I will no longer play along with the person who says it.**

The *personal self* and ethics are also touched upon in connection with non-honourable behaviour between the primary parties:

(10) P14: This is a very good question, because **it shows that I am not very professional**. When I see for example that a Finn is cheated, I will tell the person later: “You should think about it.” I won’t tell them straight: “Listen, you are deceived in this, this and this!” But I do say: “You need to think twice.”

Similarly to other participants, P14 thus first implied that the decision to help was “unprofessional” according to the current professional standards. At closer inspection, though, it proved to be made because it was ethical:

(11) P14: I do this because – I think it comes from the principle of **honesty**.

P10 analyzed her decisions in an ethical quandary in words that help to sum up many of her colleagues’ explanations for solving similar dilemmas:

(12) P10: **If I take it from the viewpoint of [interpreting] ethics, it was misusing power. But if I take it from the human viewpoint, this was using power in the interest of the client.**

The participants’ personal self seems to be in constant dialogue with the professional one, that is, with the role and the Code demands. There is a strong involvement of the personal self (values, ethics, evaluation). At the same time, with the exception of seriously challenging ethical dilemmas, all this seldom comes to the fore. Most of the time, insights (i.e. personal self) are applied in the interests of coordination, group-management and interaction (i.e. professional self). I suggest that this may be seen as a new model in which the personal and the professional self are both present. The interpreters’ primary focus still lies on the effective mediation of messages and socio-cultural contexts.

Cultural mediation

I also wanted to find out whether societal changes could have influenced the participants. Eight participants had worked as interpreters already in the Soviet period; twelve had been working from the beginning of the 1990s. Thus their reports may help to shed some light on insights of practitioners moving through different societal orders.

Q8: Have the interpreting situations in Estonia changed from the beginning of the 1990s? Have the clients changed? Do you think this has influenced your role as an interpreter? How?

Q9: Interpreting as export-import. Do you feel you are mediating between societies/ philosophies/ ethical dimensions? What is the role of the interpreter in that?

There was some social and political evaluation involved in the work process. A definite importation of values from Western-European countries was evident (P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P14):

(13) P9: *Definitely a lot*. Take for example the field of family planning and sexual education [...]. Well, for us, this is...In this respect that they have had this education for already ... the union is 80 years old, it has been an obligatory

subject at schools for 50 years.¹⁰ [...] **This is really a missionary work.** [...] Another example [...] is the issue of foster-parents. For example in Sweden, orphanages as institutions have been practically closed down. Everything goes through the families. **This is importing a change in the worldview.** Right!

Participants mentioned that they interpreted training sessions in various communal areas including work with homeless children and people with alcohol problems, family planning education, seminars on solving social problems and supporting crime victims, the rehabilitation of drug addicts, training the military, and educating rescue services. However, the cultural exchanges did not only happen in one direction, since the inventions and cultural traditions of the materialistically poorer society were still able to make a valuable contribution to the materialistically richer society (P8, P10). The interpreters gave several examples of such export or mediation of cultural values and traditions:

(14) P10: But I also think we could mention [...]our song festivals – I know people who have come to visit them more than once. **Once, the first time, they just happened to visit these, in a delegation. But then I know quite many people [...] who [...] especially come to Estonia to visit our song festivals.**

Interpreters also perceived a clear difference between the interpreting situations in the Soviet period and today:

(15) P4: **My interpreting situations in the Russian time were actually very political.** I didn't have any experience that wasn't. **In the Russian period no one was simply allowed to come here. Those I had to interpret for, for example, were still related** [to politics]. They were from the DDR, and they had some friendship relations here – but those who came were still secretaries of the party and the receptions were for those with positions high up in the party.

This brought about a serious ethical clash for P4, and a sense of liberation in interpreting situations today was expressed again in the continuation of the interview:

(16) P4: And there was... there was always such a harsh ethical conflict. [...]official interpreting – it was political. **It was always there.** [...] In fact there was, now that these changes came, for me **a very strong feeling of liberation.**

She also perceived a change between the beginning of the 1990s and today:

(17) P5: I actually think that communication has changed [...]. Maybe this is the events in themselves and the way of organizing things that have changed.

Also, “today the self is stronger in general” (P4). In contrast to the insights of Cronin (2002) and Jones (2004) which see translators and interpreters as consciously acting diplomats, however, the participants held that their evaluation of the macro-sociological scale was most

¹⁰ Sweden and Estonia – this interpreter's language pair –, as examples of countries that have reached the post-modern and modern stages of development respectively (cf. Veebel 2005), offer interesting insights into the transportation of ideas and educating societies. For example, only a year after our interview, doctors made the headline in Estonia with their suggestion to make sexual education *in the future* obligatory in schools (PM 23.12.2005). And this was only the start. We may presume that in many cases the interpreted events may have contributed to launching similar processes.

often not allowed to intervene with their work process. The exceptions to this were the more marked ethical cases, some of which have been described above.

Conclusion

The results of the study thus demonstrate that:

1. There is a group of interpreters who specialize in liaison interpreting. Their self-descriptions yield an interesting picture of increased interpreter interaction, whilst at the same time neutrality is observed in the interests of the clients.
2. The notions of *professional self* and *personal self* can be introduced for analyzing the interpreter's role. Interpreters often resort to dimensions that can be described by these notions when scrutinizing the implications of their role.
3. The more dynamic role of liaison interpreters can be viewed in the light of individualization and democratization processes. Interpreters conceptualize their role through mediating between societies, different mindsets, and values. Interpreters also perceive a change in society, their work situations, and role demands in comparison with the Soviet period, the beginning of the 1990s, and today. Today their self appears more liberated.

Practitioners are critically reviewing the current principles of best practice. Many see this as related to changes in society, interpreting situations, and communication patterns. In close client cooperation and interaction, a new identity and role model seem to be evolving. In contrast to what has long been taught at many interpreter training courses and enshrined in Codes of professional practice, in this role model both dimensions of *personal* and *professional self* are often present. Furthermore, the results illustrate an interesting balance between the *personal* and *professional self* which, I suggest, is rather unique in its explicitness. On the one hand, the Code as such is not regarded as inflexible. It is respected but within the limits of its operability. It is evaluated, criticized, and adapted to specific needs of interpreting situations. On the other hand, this is still done in keeping with the spirit of the Code in order to guarantee the efficiency of the interpreted mediation. Participants have been testing different ways of performing their role in real life in order to gain a satisfactory solution by means of comparing standards (the Code, the enforcement of the *professional self*) and external feedback (user expectations) (cf. Ibarra 1999 on *provisional selves*). They have been evaluating and adapting their *professional selves* (including the *front, manner and appearance*) to increasingly placate these with their *personal self* dimension (cf. Katan and Straniero-Sergio 2001). The *personal self* is no longer rejected. It is considered for the purposes of finding the right balance – to determine whether, and to what extent to adapt.

I suggest that these dimensions could be useful for analyzing the interpreter's role at the theoretical level and for pedagogical purposes. I suggest that accepting the existence of these dimensions and learning to reconcile these already in the training process could lead to better interaction and interpreting outcomes, and possibly reduce the notorious stress levels of both novices and practitioners in the profession.

The results of this research seem to suggest that, in contrast to what earlier research has suggested, the need for increased interpreter interaction does not need to be associated merely with asymmetrical power positions or differences in the socio-economic positions of participants (as opposed to what has been suggested in Wadensjö 1992, 1998; Tate and Turner 1997/2002; Pöllabauer 2006). In our data the *personal self* of interpreters did not come to the fore for the sake of visibility (in contrast to Angelelli 2004) or client entertainment (in contrast to Katan and Straniero-Sergio 2001). Thus, our data suggests that increased

interpreter interaction happens as a result of an ordinary human communication (cf. Linell 1997, 1998). The *personal self* is included for more effective cooperation, for ethical considerations and comfort. While professional neutrality related to the *professional self* is maintained in the interpreted turns, in sub-dialogues the *personal self* of interpreters can be expressed. Beyond that, interpreters interact with and help to mediate between societies and mentalities (cf. Lambert 1991; Pym 2004), entailing both the *personal* and *professional self* dimensions.

The methodological framework of ethnography and the tools of micro-ethnography have proved to be effective. Each interview was building up a body of similar view points by people of whom many thought that they stood alone with their responses to the interpreting job (cf. 'isolation' in Tate and Turner 1997/2002). The chosen methodology helped to reveal what practitioners think of their role and to discover interesting parallels between their self-conceptions and broader societal influences. The self-descriptions have been rich in insights and have offered valuable information, which also responded to the questions I posed at the beginning of this article.

Research on interpreting has tended to follow the Code mode, and the social turn to a great extent focuses on the negation of this model. Through reconciling the different approaches, and accepting diversity, new vistas into developing modern dynamic role models for interpreters could be opened.

There is definitely a subtle change evolving in the profession, as there is a move towards more humanization as opposed to the earlier de-humanized, machine-like conception of the interpreter. The realities of the profession and insights by practitioners will need to be borne in mind when sketching future Codes of ethics, while also special training programs (cf. Sandrelli 2001) should be offered for liaison interpreters in countries where they do not yet exist.

Hopefully, the participants' role descriptions of a profession in the making can add to the mosaic of role descriptions throughout the world. Parallels to similar developments in other professions can be made. The processes of mediating between the transition society¹¹ and the West could indeed be similar for other Central and Eastern European countries. The participants claimed that different training seminars were often carried out in a number of such countries. It offers an interesting picture of an importation of soft values (i.e. non-materialistic values like caring, compassion, justice, honesty, taking care of the weaker ones; cf. Kalmus et al. 2004) into this (former?) 'buffer zone' of the West. This illustrates an interesting phase in the development of Europe. It also illustrates the new European Union with its diversities and challenges. On the world map we can view these processes *vis-à-vis* the developments in professionalization elsewhere and in different other professions. We live in a period of interesting geo-political and economic changes. The data gained for this study suggests that the development of interpreter roles can be viewed in the light of these.

¹¹ Cf. the definition of 'transition countries' as given on the homepage for the Master in Transition Studies at Justus-Liebig Universität Giessen, Germany: "Transition countries are characterized by enormous economic and political transformations. Their societies are changing from a state-led command system to a market economy, from autocracy to democracy. The group of transition countries includes the successor states of the former Soviet Union, the countries of Eastern and South Eastern Europe, as well as recent transition countries in Africa and Asia, for example China." [<http://www.uni-giessen.de/zeu/TS/home.html>] (accessed 9 November 2009).

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