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Theory and training in conference interpreting

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Theory and training in conference interpreting

Initial explorations

Daniel Gile and Rafael Barranco-Droege

Introduction

At its simplest, a ‘theory’ is a belief, an assumption or a hypothesis. In that sense, even individual novice interpreters with no training have an implicit individual ‘theory’ about what they are expected to do and how they are expected to behave when interpreting. Such a theory is induced by their personal life history and perhaps by ideas and beliefs about language and life in society.

Implicit and explicit or partly explicit theories seem to have developed before specialised academic programmes became the main providers of conference interpreter training. In a review article, Keiser (2000) mentions ad hoc courses and private training initiatives in the West and in other parts of the world. Analyzing the beginning of interpreter training in China in the 1980s, Chen et al. (2019) refer to publications on different types of interpreting which consisted mainly of summaries of personal interpreting experience and thoughts on what to teach and how to teach. The sharing of such thoughts and experience, though not necessarily through publications, led to collective theories of interpreting which emerged from a consensus but “lacked depth” (Chen et al. 2019: 88).

After conference interpreting became a profession, shortly after World War I (Herbert 1952: 1; see also Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez & Payás, Chapter 1, in this volume), some practitioners started investing more systematic reflection in interpreting, developing some rules, and publishing. The best-known classics from this period are Herbert’s handbook on conference interpreting (1952) and Rozan’s handbook on note-taking (1956). Both are experience-based, practical and directive. Neither is theoretical in the academic sense. Such largely prescriptive constructs will be referred to here as ‘interpreting-principles theories’ (IPTs).

Theories which involve more abstract conceptualizations of phenomena associated with language communication, society and human cognition as well as engagement with theories in relevant academic disciplines and with empirical research in varying proportions developed in academia will be referred to here as ‘academic theories’.

As is the case in virtually any classification related to human behavior, these categories overlap. In particular, since most conference interpreter trainers are practicing conference
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interpreters themselves, even academic theories which they develop and/or adapt tend to include intuitive, implicit components, as well as IPT components. For this reason, ‘theory’ as it is conceptualized and understood by individual trainers and students when they talk about it lies on a continuum, one pole of which is implicit individual theory and the other academic theory.

In translation and interpreting studies (TIS), strong views are often expressed about the usefulness of theory for practice and for didactics (see a review in Di Mango 2018), sometimes with a call for research. For instance, Angelelli (2013: 195) claims that interpreter education “is based on research and principles”, which make up a foundation that allows teachers to justify their choices (see also Kalina & Barranco-Droege, Chapter 24, in this volume).

This preference is perhaps natural for researchers, but is not necessarily shared by practitioners (see Chesterman & Wagner 2002 for the case of written translation). The authors of the present study are interested and involved in research, and in particular in academic theory, but have observed different attitudes among colleagues. They have also observed marked theoretical developments in TIS over the years, and have seen in the field indications of changes in the presence of theory in training programs. For instance, up to the late 1980s, in several highly selective interpreter training programs approved by AIIC, such as ESIT in Paris and ETI in Geneva, there were no theory classes as such, and few members of the teaching staff had done any research themselves. This is no longer the case, as indicated in their websites.

Over the years, especially since the 1990s, many interpreter training programs were set up in universities or ‘academized’ (this in particular was the case in Spain—see MEC 1991); academic requirements, including research by teaching staff and sometimes by students, gradually became part of the landscape. What came to be known as ‘interpreting studies’ developed rapidly, especially with the worldwide spread of the Internet and the ensuing facilitation of information flows and exchanges across countries and continents.

This begs the question whether the use of theory in interpreter training curricula has changed over the years. Did the resulting availability of richer theoretical developments and empirical findings have marked effects on the presence and influence of academic theory in interpreter training programs? More specifically, was it taught more often to students? Did global exchanges result in a wider spectrum of theoretical ideas and constructs being offered to them, as opposed to more ‘local’ theories before the late 1990s? Did the balance between IPTs and academic theories change?

Answering these questions with precise, reliable data is difficult, as documents from the past are rare and memories fade. Even a comprehensive description of the present situation would require multi-center ethnographic studies with wide participation. This small study seeks to gather preliminary data and identify possible trends, in the hope that this will trigger more research on the topic, perhaps going beyond conference interpreting into other forms of interpreting and translation.

In the following sections, the main academic and less academic theories identified by the authors as potentially predominant in conference interpreter training programs, either because they are directly used in training or because they are taught as background knowledge, are briefly characterised, before some data from an ad hoc survey and from other sources are presented and discussed.

**Theories in conference interpreter training**

Interpreting-related academic theories (operationally defined as those which have generated academic publications) all relate to the use of language and could therefore be viewed as theories about language. Many of them also refer to interpreting cognition and could therefore be...
considered cognitive theories. Some can be classified as ‘philosophical’ (in a wide sense) or socio-philosophical, as they express views on the interpreters’ and translators’ role in society, including fidelity/loyalty and cultural mediation options.

Since many of these theories share features from more than one of these categories and sometimes include IPTs, a strict taxonomy in a tree-like structure with non-overlapping categories and sub-categories is not possible. For the purposes of this initial exploration of the actual presence of theory in conference interpreter training programs as perceived by students and trainers, it therefore appeared preferable to opt for a somewhat unorthodox classification based on names and verbal descriptors used in the literature and in the responses of students and trainers when asked about ‘theory’ in the present survey (see below). The resulting list is presented in the following pages.

**Interpretive Theory of Translation (ITT) and the ESIT-AIIC paradigm**

Judging by the accounts of its main founders, Seleskovitch and Lederer (see in particular the introduction in Seleskovitch 1975; Seleskovitch & Lederer 1989), Interpretive Theory was primarily based on professional experience and the practitioners’ field experience and intuitions. Its linchpin, the concept of ‘deverbalization’, was initially described as a stage between the reception of a verbally formulated source-language utterance and its reformulation in the target language during which traces of the linguistic form of the source utterance disappear from the interpreter’s memory, to be replaced by the ‘sense’ it induces. According to Lederer (pers. comm.), this concept was actually based on psycholinguistic experiments which showed that memory for form tended to fade rapidly after clause boundaries (presumably Sachs 1967), though conference interpreter trainers at ESIT rapidly turned it into a methodological principle, namely “translate on the basis of meaning, not form”. The original deverbalization concept was the main academic-theory component of ITT, most of the rest being on the IPT side: simultaneous interpreting is an accelerated form of consecutive, working into one’s A language is better than working into one’s B language, when preparing for a conference, focus on ideas and concepts more than on words, in consecutive, take notes in the target-language rather than in the source language, etc.

ESIT leaders Seleskovitch and Thiéry (who headed the interpreting section for many years) were AIIC officers, and the ESIT training model, which was largely based on the conference interpreting tradition established by pioneers such as Herbert (1952) and Rozan (1956) from Geneva, spread widely throughout AIIC and training programs which aspired to follow AIIC prescriptions (see de Vasconcelos Araujo 2018 for the case of Brazil). It therefore seems reasonable to talk about an ESIT-AIIC IPT. Despite contacts with psychologists and psycholinguists who were eager to cooperate with interpreters (e.g. Gerver & Sinaiko 1978), ITT developed in isolation from other academic interpreting theories; these were virtually never cited by authors from ESIT.

**The Effort Models (EMs)**

The EMs (e.g. Gile 1995/2009) aim to shed light not on the interpreting process as a whole, but on the implications of the high cognitive load to which interpreters are subjected on overall performance and on tactics and strategies. Gile, an ESIT alumnus, considered that ITT did not sufficiently take on board the cognitive load factor, and developed his concepts and models with input from cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics. Essentially, the EMs adopt the distinction between controlled operations (‘Efforts’), which take up attentional resources, and automated operations, which virtually do not. They also adopt the idea that attentional
resources are limited at any time and assume that operational functions in interpreting (in particular, speech and text comprehension, speech and note production, memory operations over very short periods, attentional resource management) tend to take up most of the attentional resources interpreters can and do invest in the task at any time. This accounts for frequent cognitive saturation and for many errors, omissions and infelicities. The EMs and associated models (including the Gravitational Model of language availability, Gile 1995/2009) are not prescriptive, though they do discuss the advantages and drawbacks of various tactics and strategies, including the choice of the note-taking language in consecutive and strategies for working language improvement (see also Riccardi, Chapter 27, in this volume).

Cognitive and neuroscientific theories

While ITT is mainly an IPT presumably augmented with one finding from cognitive psychology (Sachs 1967), and the EMs and associated models are based on field observation and a significant contribution of cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, in some training programs, an approach more strongly entrenched in cognitive psychology per se is vibrant.

This tradition started out with the work of cognitive psychologists who were interested in the cognitive processes underlying simultaneous interpreting, including Henri Barik, David Gerver, and Dominic Massaro. Moser(-Mercer) developed a cognitive process model of simultaneous interpreting on the basis of Massaro’s model (Moser 1978), and when she became head of the interpreting section of ETI, Geneva, she devoted much effort to cooperation with psychologists. Her successor Kilian G. Seeber has similar interests. Cognitive theories were also very present at the University of Ottawa conference interpreter training programme through psychologist Sylvie Lambert, who taught interpreting though she was not an interpreter herself.

During the same period, in the late 1980s and in the 1990s, Laura Gran, leader of the conference interpreter training program at the University of Trieste, was actively promoting interdisciplinarity in research on interpreting and benefited from cooperation with neuropsychologist Franco Fabbro, who co-supervised many of her students’ master’s theses, spanning both cognitive psychology and neuroscience. At the University of Granada, cooperation also took place between psychologists and the Department of Translation and Interpreting, as exemplified by Presentación Padilla Benítez’s doctoral dissertation on working memory (1995).

More recently, many interpreters-cum-researchers (‘practisearchers’) who also teach interpreting in various parts of the world, and in particular China and Japan (see recent entries in the CIRIN Bulletin at www.cirin-gile.fr), have been focusing on working memory, on cognitive load and on cognitive effort.

Neuroscience elicited attention not only in Trieste, but also in Geneva, in Vienna and in Turku. The neuroscientific component of cognitive science as applied to conference interpreting is developing rapidly with the emerging field of CTIS (cognitive translation and interpreting studies, see García & Muñoz 2020; see also Hervais-Adelman, Chapter 34, in this volume).

Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory was initially developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) and inspired by philosopher Grice’s cooperative principle and conversational maxims, which could be classified as both linguistic and cognitive. It is a conceptual framework for reflection on utterance comprehension and aims to account for the fact that in communication, utterances convey more information than the information they provide explicitly. They are ‘ostensive’ in that they tell addressees that the utterer wants to communicate information to them, and the addressees
make inferences on the basis of what the utterance tells them in the light of what they already know. Utterances are considered ‘relevant’ if this process can be done at low cognitive cost. Addressees seek out relevant utterances, discard the remaining input and build a provisional representation of the meaning of the whole discourse.

Relevance Theory was introduced into translation studies (TS) by Gutt (1991). In interpreting, Setton (1999) is probably its most vocal representative. In a recent publication on conference interpreting didactics, Setton and Dawrant (2016: 161) recommend it strongly as a general theory of human verbal communication for conference interpreting students. The pertinence of this theory to note-taking in consecutive is also obvious, as notes taken by conference interpreters are only pointers to the message, not a comprehensive written record of its content, and authors such as Albl-Mikasa in Zurich and Someya in Osaka use it in their analyses (see their contributions in Someya 2017).

The Probability Prediction Model

Chernov’s Probability Prediction Model is also both linguistic and cognitive, and ties in nicely with Relevance Theory. Chernov (1979, 2004) describes how interpreters progressively develop a mental representation of the speech by drawing inductive inferences. They use knowledge stored in their long-term memory to make probability-based (or rather plausibility-based) predictions, which they may confirm or discard later. These processes take place concurrently and recursively at different levels of communication, with extra-linguistic references and the appraisal of the speaker’s intentions playing a prominent role. As the speech unfolds, its ‘subjective redundancy’ increases as a function of these inferences, and new information is no longer new for the interpreter and allows compression. The higher the ‘objective’ redundancy of the speech in terms of linguistic patterns and cross-references, the faster the inferences. They are mostly subconscious, which sets them apart from the strategies and tactics discussed below and may fail if the speech is dense or incoherent, in which case, according to Chernov, simultaneous interpreting becomes impossible (see also Hodzik & Williams, Chapter 26, in this volume).

Functional theories

These theories appeared in (written) TS in the wake of the ‘pragmatic’ or ‘communicative turn’ in linguistics that had given rise to notions such as ‘speech act’ and ‘discourse’, revisiting classical rhetoric. Prominent examples include Vermeer’s Skopos Theory, Reiß and Vermeer’s General Theory of Translation (1984) and Holz-Mänttäri’s Translatorial Action Theory (1984). These theories were intended to cover interpreting as well, and interpreting scholars such as Pöchhacker (1995) built upon this approach in their own reflection.

The main tenet of functional theories, a ‘philosophical’ one, is that translation is not possible without predefining its purpose in a ‘commission’ or ‘translation brief’. The focus is placed on the addressee’s perception of the target text, and major importance is attributed to its coherence. The features of a translation which make it adequate are determined by its purpose, which need not be semantic equivalence. This provoked some criticism among scholars, which prompted Nord (1997) to introduce the notion of ‘loyalty’ to the original author.

Linguistic theories

Modern research on written translation has drawn heavily upon linguistic theories, in particular, on those focusing on languages as systems, e.g. Vinay & Darbelnet (1958), Catford (1965).
In mainstream interpreting studies, early contributions that assumed that interpreters engage in comparison and transfer between two languages (e.g. Kade 1968; Salevsky 1985) and those evaluating interpreter output along the same lines (e.g. Barik 1975) were overshadowed by Interpretive Theory. However, in some training institutions, TIS is taught as an overarching discipline, increasing the students’ exposure to theories from linguistics and TS, including comparative stylistics and Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics.

Note that over the past few decades, linguistics have become largely part of cognitive science, and in interpreting studies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the two.

**Note-taking theories**

Most ‘note-taking theories’ mentioned by students and teachers in the survey described in the next section (e.g. Rozan 1956; Matyssek 1989; and Gillies 2005) are IPTs rather than academic theories, Albl-Mikasa’s theory of note-taking in consecutive (2007 and Someya 2017), which is based on Relevance Theory, being one exception. The findings of our survey (see later in this chapter) suggest that, they are very present in conference interpreter training programs. However, in responses to the questionnaire, it is not clear whether students refer to coherently presented theoretical constructs, or to essentially experience-based methodological advice on note-taking techniques (see also Ahrens & Orlando, Chapter 3, in this volume).

**Interpreting strategies/tactics**

Interpreting strategies (deliberate actions decided with some planning) and tactics (on-the-spot deliberate actions to prevent imminent difficulties, overcome them or mitigate their effects) have been introduced to conference interpreting students from the very beginning of interpreter training. They were mostly taught in the form of IPTs, as a set of methodological prescriptions to overcome problems arising from interlinguistic and intercultural differences between the source and target languages and cultures in interpreting assignments and from ever-present cognitive pressure during interpreting.

In the early years of conference interpreting, few interpreter trainers were aware of cognitive psychological concepts such as attentional resources and of theories about their finite nature and the requirement for executive control of their distribution during complex tasks. Starting in the 1980s, practisearchers working on interpreting began to analyze tactics (most often referred to in the literature as ‘strategies’) drawing on cognitive psychology (see, for instance, Gile 1995/2009; Kohn & Kalina 1996).

Again, when students and trainers mention ‘interpreting strategies’ when responding to questions about theory in interpreter training in this study, it is difficult to determine whether they are thinking of ad hoc methodological advice or of guidance which includes conceptual/theoretical analysis (see also Riccardi, Chapter 27, in this volume).

**A survey on the presence of theory in conference interpreter training**

Some information about the presence of theory in conference interpreter training programs can be found in documents describing the curricula of the relevant institutions. Cavallo (2019) used such documents to help her develop a “conference interpreter competence model”. However, these documents fail to indicate its actual use in the interpreting classroom. To have a better idea, on-site observation of classes and ethnographic analyses would be the most sensitive and
reliable method. For the present volume, the authors endeavored to gather preliminary data in the hope that this would generate useful information and encourage colleagues to undertake wider studies on the topic.

The first author started by drafting a personal narrative of his experience as a student at ESIT and sent it by email to a few colleagues, asking them to write their own narratives on the basis of their memories as students. He also showed it to other colleagues in the booth during interpreting assignments with the same request. Responses were interesting and informative but contained data that were not directly relevant. This suggested that questionnaires and interviews with specific questions might be a more efficient tool to collect targeted information. Moreover, questionnaires had the potential of reaching more colleagues and students. Opportunities arose to meet more colleagues, interview them and test out questionnaires, both in the interpreting booth and during academic meetings. Questionnaires were also sent by email to colleagues. A number of them, including conference interpreter trainers in various programs, became interested in the project and helped out by distributing the questionnaires to other trainers and students. It was thus possible to extend the sample to respondents currently in training. Since time was pressing and the number of potential respondents was uncertain, the operation was launched without a formal piloting stage, and the questionnaires were fine-tuned (ambiguities were removed and further questions were added) as responses arrived. Clear answers to questions from successive versions were included in the analysis because in this preliminary exploratory operation, the authors sought to reach a diversified target population and every individual response counted. Thus, both the student questionnaire and the trainer questionnaire should be considered an extension of ethnographic work rather than a formal traditional survey, planned and piloted in advance.

This also means that quantitative analyses could only be performed on what the authors considered clear responses to virtually identical questions (e.g. when slight changes were introduced in the wording to do away with ambiguity). The final versions of the two questionnaires are appended.

Questionnaires were complemented by follow-up questions when responses were unclear and respondents had identified themselves (they had the option of sending their anonymous responses to one person who centralized them and then forwarded them to the investigators, but most respondents chose to identify themselves).

Ideally, students could be expected to report explicit references to theory by their teachers and perhaps give further indications as to its actual use in the classroom, e.g. for explanatory purposes. However, as they tend to focus on the acquisition of interpreting skills rather than on declarative knowledge, there was a likely possibility that they would miss or forget some references to theories even if they took the advice based on them. Asking trainers as well gave the possibility of capturing implicit use of theories (when they were not named in class), as well as its use by the trainers to scaffold their own mental representation of the interpreting process and associated phenomena.

**Student questionnaires: design rationale**

The main questions of interest were whether academic theory was actually used in training, how it was used and how frequently. Another question was which theories were used and in what institutions: were theories in use institution- or country-specific, as at least some of them were in the 1970s and 1980s, or had they spread beyond initial geographic spheres of influence over time? Respondents were therefore asked where and when they had been trained.
In a study on the perception of theory in training, Kleibs (2018)—see the section on perception and expectations later in this chapter—found that the distinction between theory and methodological advice was often unclear to students. Rather than providing explanations in the questionnaire which many students were likely not to read carefully or which might have put them off and reduced markedly the response rate, an indirect awareness-raising question was introduced in the questionnaire: students were asked whether their training program included thematic classes, methodological classes, classes in theory and classes in research methods. The latter category could also be used, it was hoped, to document a probable link between the presence of theory and research requirements in training programs. Students were also asked whether they were required to write a research paper or thesis. In addition, to provide further indications on the nature of the ‘theories’ they referred to and to help identify links between theories and particular institutions, they were asked whether they remembered names of theories and/or authors that were studied in class. One other question was whether theory was used in practical interpreting classes—as opposed to distinct classes devoted to theory, and another whether they remembered theory being used for explanations in class, as opposed to plain recommendations on what they should and should not do. They were also asked to indicate whether theory was mentioned by most teachers, by a minority of teachers, or by one or two teachers only.

After receiving some responses in which students mentioned that the theories that were used in their respective institutions depended on the language combination, a request to indicate the working language combination in which they had been trained was added to the questionnaire.

At ESIT, the first author of this chapter had observed that Interpretive Theory was associated with a very cohesive practical training methodology. In order to ascertain whether there were similar links between theory and training methods elsewhere, at the end of the questionnaire, students were asked whether they felt that all teachers used the same methodology and that there was a strong conceptual/theoretical foundation underlying individual classes.

Finally, they were asked if they had further comments or information to add.

Student questionnaires: results

Between July 2019 and the beginning of January 2020, 157 responses were received from 41 institutions, overwhelmingly European (15 countries). There were 2 responses from Asia, 2 from Latin America and 1 from North America.

The number of responses from most institutions was small, which made it difficult to compare the past and present, except for the case of Charles University, Prague: 13 responses from former students who were trained before the year 2000 and 18 responses from students and former students trained since the year 2000 suggest that academic interpreting-related theories were virtually absent from the programme during the 1980s and 1990s, whereas a wide range of such theories are being taught in recent years. The program at Charles University is the only case where both the number of responses and their homogeneity make it possible to clearly identify a change towards more theory and more global dissemination of interpreting-related academic theories over time.

For the training program in Mainz, campus Germersheim, a relatively high number of responses (18) were received, but they varied in their answers, with a few comments suggesting that which theories were taught depended on the individual teachers. From the 15 responses received from the training program in Graz, it appears that only general TS theories, but no interpreting theories are taught to conference interpreting students. According to 11 responses from the University of Heidelberg, including 3 from respondents who were trained in the 1980s,
Theory and training

no theory was taught in the program at that time, and there is high variability in responses for the more recent period.

Interestingly, students from ESIT (6 respondents) only named Seleskovitch and Interpretive Theory, and students from ISIT, Paris (4 respondents), the St. Petersburg School of Interpretation and Translation at Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia (8 respondents) and the recently established conference interpreter training program of the University of Aarhus (3 respondents) mentioned no theory at all. In many other responses, with a majority of people who were trained in the past 10 years—interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, including many who were trained in 2018/2019—respondents indicated that they “forgot” what theories/authors were mentioned in class, or that the only theories mentioned were linguistic or related to written translation. Other respondents listed many names of authors/theories, including Andres, Chernov, Gile, Kalina, Kurz, Kutz, Pöchhacker, Seleskovitch, and Shlesinger.

The link between the awareness of theories and a research thesis requirement does not stand out clearly in the data from the responses either. In many cases, respondents being trained in institutions where there is no such requirement mention no authors/theories at all or only one or two (this stands out in the case of ESIT and ISIT), and responses from institutions which do require students to complete a research thesis include many names, but there are several exceptions, and the sample is too small to make clear-cut inferences.

The problem is compounded by some carelessness in the responses of some students, who may have filled out the questionnaires at their teacher’s request without little personal motivation, and did not answer all the questions or contradicted themselves. For instance, some answered one question by saying that no theory was present in their institution and indicated elsewhere that theory was used in practical interpreting classes.

Interestingly, in spite of the awareness-raising question mentioned earlier, when asked about ‘theory’, 24 of those who provided valid answers other than “forgot” (102 valid answers from 157 respondents) named Gillies, Herbert, Jones, Matyssek, or Rozan, whose work was methodological rather than theoretical, and when they indicated that theory was taught in their training program, their comments showed that they were actually referring to methodological advice.

Since many answers turned out to be unreliable or uninformative, not all the data could be included in the analysis. An analysis of answers to questions that did prove informative and of the respondents’ comments yields the following tentative conclusions:

1. In the mind of many respondents, ‘theory’ includes methodological advice. In some programs, academic theory seems to be seldom if ever mentioned explicitly, and in others, it is very present through dedicated classes. The difference may depend on the more vocational vs. more academic orientation of the program in the relevant university (if any), but this could not be documented with the available data.

2. On the whole, with a few exceptions, perhaps when trainers were particularly motivated and skillful at teaching theory and showing its relevance to trainees, students do not seem to be very interested in academic theory. In their comments, a number of them expressed skepticism regarding its usefulness for interpreter training.

**Trainer questionnaires: rationale**

The limitations of the data obtained from students as discussed above made it particularly useful to also have the trainers’ viewpoint. In their questionnaire, trainers were asked whether they used interpreting theory in practical interpreting classes. They were also asked if they used certain theories, those that were frequently mentioned in the students’ responses, as well
as other theories that the authors knew from experience and from the literature as influential in many institutions (they are listed in the appended questionnaire). In addition, trainers were asked whether they used them as a conceptual framework for their own guidance, to explain phenomena to students, or for other purposes. Finally, in an attempt to gain further indications on the historical evolution of the spread of theory in training environments, they were asked when they learned about these theories, as students or later.

**Trainer questionnaires: results**

A total of 79 valid responses were received, including 60 from Europe, 9 from Asia, 5 from Latin America, 4 from Canada and the US, and 1 from Australia. All of the respondents had been teaching until very recent years or are still teaching now.

Fifty-four respondents (68 percent) said they used theory in their practical interpreting classes, 19 (24 percent) used it marginally, and 3 (4 percent) did not use theory at all. Sixty-four (81 percent) reported they used them for their own conceptualization purposes and 70 (close to 89 percent) for explanatory purposes in their interaction with students. Additional uses mentioned included helping students choose topics for an MA thesis, guidance for the choice of training materials, exchanging with other trainers, discussing performance, preparing classes, and providing a common language in exchanges between students and teachers.

Cognitive theories were used by 47 respondents (59 percent), linguistic theories by 37 (47 percent), the Effort Models by 64 (81 percent), Interpretive Theory by 50 (63 percent), Relevance Theory by 26 (33 percent), and Skopos Theory and related functional theories by 43 (54 percent). Note-taking ‘theories’ were reportedly used by 62 respondents (78 percent). No other theory was mentioned by the trainers.

Strikingly, only 4 trainers (5 percent) reported using a single theory named in the questionnaire, 11 (14 percent) used 2, 17 (22 percent) used 3, 18 (23 percent) used 4, 11 (14 percent) used 5, 8 (10 percent) used all 6. The fact that 54 (68 percent) used at least 3 different theories and that 37 (47 percent) used at least 4 suggests that overall, theories are disseminated widely worldwide among trainers and that ‘theory silos’ are on their way to becoming a thing of the past.

The data generated by the question on the time at which trainers learned about these theories were not rich enough to be analyzed meaningfully.

**Discussion of survey results**

The picture that emerges from the trainer questionnaires adds information and helps interpret the students’ responses. If the pro-theory bias in the trainers’ sample is not too strong, academic theory is quite present in conference interpreter training programs in many parts of the world insofar as trainers are familiar with several theories and actually use them for self-guidance and student guidance, even if they do not name them in class.

Nevertheless, in some programs, there is strong resistance to theory, which a number of students and trainers consider useless. Two trainers who are also course leaders, one in Europe and one in Asia, commented that they tried to introduce theory to their teaching staff, which was made up of professional interpreters rather than academics, and failed to elicit any interest on their part. Perhaps such trainers do use implicit theory as well as IPTs, but they do not believe that academic theories are relevant enough.

A number of limitations of the surveys are obvious: one is their incomplete and geographically unbalanced coverage of the population of students, trainers and institutions worldwide. Many European programs are represented, but few responses were received from other parts
of the world, including China (dozens of Chinese academic training programs include conference interpreter training), Latin America, Korea, Japan, Africa, the Middle East, and Australia. Another possible bias may be associated with the fact that in a number of cases, students received the questionnaires and sent them back via their teachers, whose preferences they presumably knew, which may have influenced their responses. Moreover, many respondents who were contacted directly were aware of the identity of the first author of this study and could have been influenced by that when writing their answers, perhaps in the direction of overstating their interest in theory, and in particular in the Effort Models. The relative frequencies of references to the six academic theories in the trainer questionnaire are therefore to be considered with caution. On the other hand, the relative popularity of certain theories suggested by Kleibs’s findings (see below) is exempt from this particular bias: respondents in her survey, mostly students as she was, were presumably not aware of a link between her study and the author of any particular theory. Finally, and more significantly perhaps, there could well be a strong bias in the sample of trainers who chose to respond to the survey. It is likely that they were more interested in theory than the general population of interpreter trainers, and the resulting impression of a relatively high popularity of theory among trainers may not be representative.

Perception of and expectations from theory in conference interpreter training

In a questionnaire study given to MA students, using interviews and focus groups, Frauke Kleibs (König) from Leipzig explored expectations from and perceptions of theory in conference interpreter training (Kleibs 2018). Input from her work is relevant to this study. Kleibs elicited information from 201 students and 21 trainers (trainers were interviewed face-to-face or via Skype) from various conference interpreter training programs in Europe and beyond (including Australia, Canada, China, and Russia).

Ninety-five percent of the students indicated they had been in contact with theory, while 7 percent of them claimed they had little or no theoretical knowledge (Kleibs 2018: 25). About half of the students claimed that theory had a positive impact on their studies; about a third could not say whether it did or not (Kleibs 2018: 33). When asked about positive and negative features of theory, 48 percent said that it gave them concrete tips for interpreting (Kleibs 2018: 37), and 21 percent that it had a reassuring effect when facing difficulties (Kleibs 2018: 38). Only 15 percent thought that theory was the foundation of interpreting practice (Kleibs 2018: 39). Thirty-nine percent said that theories had little or no link to practice (Kleibs 2018: 40), 24 percent that they took up too much time, 21 percent that they were too abstract and difficult to understand (Kleibs 2018: 41). When Kleibs asked the students to identify particularly useful theories, the Effort Models were mentioned by 19 percent, Interpretive Theory by 10 percent, note-taking techniques by 7 percent, strategies by 7 percent, neuroscience by 4 percent, and, surprisingly, Skopos Theory by 2 percent only.

As to the trainers, 38 percent of them mentioned the Effort Models, 38 percent cited Interpretive Theory, and 14 percent referred to interpreting strategies (Kleibs 2018: 66–67) as the most useful ‘theories’ for training.

Of the 21 trainers Kleibs interviewed, 90 percent expressed great interest, and 10 percent moderate interest in theory. None said that they were not interested at all (Kleibs 2018: 54), but only 48 percent considered that theory had a positive impact on the learning process, and 5 percent could not tell. None said it had no positive impact on the learning process (Kleibs 2018: 55). Regarding the function of theory in interpreter training, 90 percent said that it gave them an overview of interpreting, 57 percent that it offered strategies and solutions to
problems, 52 percent that it helped structure the teaching and learning process, and 48 percent that it helped orient students (Kleibs 2018: 56). Forty-three percent said that it helped identify and explain problems encountered by students, 38 percent that it helped foster meta-reflection on interpreting among students (Kleibs 2018: 57).

There is considerable overlapping in these responses. What is worthy of attention is that by far the most frequent answer referred to theory as giving an overview of interpreting rather than being used as a specific teaching tool. This might be a further key to understanding why so many students seem not to have noticed theory in their practical interpreting classes. Trainers may well be aware of and be receptve to theory and its contribution, but this does not necessarily translate into explicit references to theory in class or even into conscious use of theory in their teaching practice.

**Additional input**

As noted earlier, the data generated by the present survey and by Kleibs’s study are heavily biased towards Europe. In this section, additional information relevant to the place of theory in interpreter training in other parts of the world is provided as a complement.

In the framework of a recent doctoral dissertation on interpreting with Arabic, Alhalaki (2019) looked at the curricula of interpreter training institutions in three Arab countries: Syria, Lebanon and Algeria. None of them mentions theory, and only one includes a remotely related category, namely comparative stylistics. Neither is there any research requirement in these training programs.

In her doctoral dissertation, Cavallo (2019) describes the interpreter training curricula of interpreter training programs in Argentina (Universidad Nacional de Córdoba), Brazil (PUC Rio) and Chile (PUC Valparaíso). In all three, theoretical components are mentioned.

In China, interpreting is widely taught in language departments as opposed to specialised translator and interpreter training (see Dawrant, Wang & Jiang, Chapter 15, in this volume). According to Chen et al. (2019) and Ren and Huang (2019), Gile’s *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training* (1995/2009) is very popular in these programs. So is Interpretive Theory, perhaps due to the strong influence of pioneer interpreter educators such as Liu Heping and Cai Xiaohong (Ren & Huang 2019). In mainland China, translation and interpreting are taught in two types of programs, respectively more academic and more professional. In the former, at MA level, courses in theory account for 60 percent of the programs (Tao 2019). Theory is also mandatory in MTI (Master in Translating and Interpreting) curricula, established in 2007 (Cui 2019). By 2018, there were MTI programs in 249 institutions—but only a few dozen had an interpreting track. Moreover, such interpreting tracks cover various types of interpreting, and presumably, conference interpreting is only present in a fraction of them. Another relevant point noted by Cui is that according to a large-scale survey, among the problems reported by respondents, one is what they perceive as excessive focus on theory over practice, and many trainers are judged mainly by their publication activities. If this applies to trainers in the interpreting track, it is likely that they too are exposed to interpreting theory on a regular basis.

**Conclusion**

The questionnaires used in the present survey did not prove efficient as a tool to answer questions about the evolution of the presence of theory over time with any precision. On the other hand, findings do suggest rather clearly that academic interpreting theories are now disseminated widely in institutions across national and continental borders.
The data, along with anecdotal evidence from exchanges with colleagues, also support the idea that academic research is the main driver of dissemination of such theories. Implicit individual theories could remain local; the dissemination of IPTs depends largely on personal contacts between colleagues; academic research, however, cannot be dissociated from literature reviews, international meetings and publication requirements, which have led to the creation of a large number of international TIS journals, and thus crosses geographic borders.

Even in academic programs which do not include theory classes, at least some members of the teaching staff have had to complete research work to obtain higher academic degrees and tenured academic positions, and are therefore familiar with theoretical input from many sources. This means that in a way, theory is probably much more present—and in a richer form—in conference interpreter training programs nowadays than in the past.

However, the data collected in this study do not say much about how and to what extent this has changed training modalities or training curricula. As regards the latter, the only apparent difference seems to be the addition of theory modules—and sometimes research methods modules—in some programs, but documents describing curricula show that now as in the past, training consists first and foremost of practical interpreting exercises. This is not surprising, since interpreting-related research and theories have not challenged the traditional learning-by-practicing paradigm. Neither does familiarity with theories, and in the literature, there is no evidence that trainers who have adopted conceptually some of them have changed significantly the way they teach their practical classes. Individual views on directionality or on note-taking techniques may have shifted, but classes still consist of interpreting exercises in which teachers assess their students’ performance and suggest strategies, tactics and linguistic solutions to overcome weaknesses and challenges. What theory seems to have contributed are conceptual frameworks for such guidance as well as some explanatory language.

This would also account nicely for the higher popularity of simple theories with relatively little theoretical depth among both students and trainers. At the cost of low investment in time and effort, they add legitimacy to existing IPT principles and practices by integrating them into coherent conceptual frameworks. More sophisticated constructs such as Relevance Theory require a higher investment with what may be perceived as marginal gain for practical explanations and guidance in the classroom.

The situation may be different in other branches of interpreting, in particular community interpreting, court interpreting, police interpreting, educational interpreting, where ethical, behavioral and perhaps even legal issues are more salient. In these settings, sociological theories in particular may have had a stronger influence (as suggested indeed in Ren & Huang’s 2019 review of Chinese research into interpreting).

Finally, for further exploration of the actual influence of theory on interpreter training, the best methodological approach would probably be a combination of careful field observation and in-depth interviews. Such ethnographic studies would be mostly conducted locally, on many sites, and could be suggested to students looking for a topic for their MA thesis.

Notes
1 See the editorial of CIRIN Bulletin n° 50, July 2015, for an explanation.
2 The authors gratefully acknowledge the help of Michaela Albl-Mikasa, Dörte Andres, Angelique Antonova, Martina Behr, Ivana Čeňková, Helle Dam, Frauke König and Alicja Okoniewska for their kind support in this endeavor.
3 The authors are also grateful to Liu Heping, Shang Xiaoqi and Sun Sanjun for valuable information on interpreting and interpreter training in China.
References


Appendix A: Final version of student questionnaire

Questions for personal narrative of experience as a student of conference interpreting

Introductory statement

Through this short questionnaire, we are trying to look at the presence/absence/influence of theoretical thinking and formal theories in the training of conference interpreters at various times in various places from the 1970s onwards, the overarching question being whether and to what extent theory was actually influential in various training programs worldwide at various periods.

This research endeavor includes no judgement, no quality ranking, no criticism or praise of theories, teachers or training programs; we are just trying to establish facts about individual perceptions and memories. Your cooperation would be highly appreciated.

The identity of respondents will be treated as confidential, unless contributors explicitly write to us they do not wish to remain anonymous. You may use your real name, or invent a name (an alias), and then send your questionnaire to someone you trust who will forward the file to us on your behalf without disclosing your identity. You can send your response in
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English, French, German, Portuguese or Spanish to daniel.gile@yahoo.com. If you wish to be informed of findings, please indicate a mail address to which it can be sent.

**Preliminary question:** if you were trained as a conference interpreter at one or several institutions, please indicate each and the year/s during which you were trained at each.

Institutions*: ________________
When? (Years): ________________
In what language combination? ________________
*If there are more than 2 institutions, we would be grateful if you could reply to the questions for each.

1. **Types of classes**
As you remember them, what types of classes were given at your institution for conference interpreting students besides practical interpreting classes?

- Thematic classes (economics, international institutions. etc.)? Y / N / Forgot
- Methodological classes (how to take notes in consecutive, conference preparation. etc.)? Y / N / Forgot
- Classes in theory (linguistics, cognitive science, sociology. etc.)? Y / N / Forgot
- Classes in research methods? Y / N / Forgot

2. **Classes in theory and research methods**

- If the program included theory and research methods, how many such classes were there, over what time? (One or two semesters, throughout the training program?)
- What theories/authors were studied in such classes? Do you remember names?
- Was there one dominant theory/or two? Y / N / Forgot
- If so, which theory was it/theories were they?
- Did students have to write a research paper or research thesis? Y / N / Forgot

3. **Theory in practical classes**

- Was theory (what you perceive as ‘theory’, not necessarily according to a formal definition) mentioned in practical interpreting classes? Y / N / Forgot
- If so, (1) By most teachers? (2) By a minority of teachers? (3) By just one or two teachers?
- Do you remember cases where theory was used to explain in class, as opposed to just indicating what should or should not be done? Y / N / Forgot

4. **Training paradigm**

- As far as you remember, did all teachers follow the same methods and principles when giving classes? All with same principles / Some individual variation / Much variation
- Did you feel there was a strong common conceptual/theoretical basis underlying individual classes? Y / N / Not certain
Theory and training

Are there any comments or pieces of information you would like to add? Many thanks. Your contribution is highly appreciated.

Appendix B: Final version of trainer questionnaire

Questions for conference interpreter trainers

Introductory statement

[Same as in the students’ questionnaire for students, with the addition of the following sentence:]

Please note that this questionnaire is about practical conference interpreting classes, as opposed to lectures/classes/workshops dedicated to theory, to the acquisition of thematic knowledge, etc.

Preliminary question: if you taught/teach conference interpreting at one or several institutions, please indicate each and the years during which you were a trainer at each.

- Institution (and country):
- When? (Years):
- Language combination(s):
- Consecutive, simultaneous, sight translation? C / S / ST

1. In the practical interpreting classes that you gave/give, did/do you use ‘theory’, meaning formal theories or a coherent set of theoretical assumptions and principles?

   Yes / No / Marginally

2. If ‘Yes’ or ‘Marginally’, can you name the theory/ies (from translation or interpreting theory) or the discipline(s) it/they come(s) from?

   In alphabetical order:

   - Cognitive psychology and cognitive science in general Y / N
   - Linguistic theories Y / N
   - Effort Models and related concepts Y / N
   - Interpretive theory Y / N
   - Relevance theory Y / N
   - Skopos theory and related functional theories Y / N
   - ‘Theories’ about note-taking in consecutive interpreting (Rozan, Matyssek, Gillies, etc.) Y / N

3. If you answered ‘Yes’ or ‘marginally’ to question 1, did/do you use it:

   - As a conceptual framework for your own guidance? Y / N
   - To explain to students phenomena that occur in class and/or explain recommendations? Y / N
   - For other purposes? Y / N

   If Y, please explain

   - If Y, how did you learn about such theory?
(1) It was taught when I was a student (2) I heard/read about it later (3) Other—please explain

- Are there any comments or pieces of information you would like to add?
- Would you be willing to be interviewed for further discussion on these topics? Y / N

If Y, please indicate an email address and/or phone number.

Many thanks. Your input is valuable, and your willingness to devote time and effort to this questionnaire is sincerely appreciated.