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Sex and gender in conference interpreting

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Introduction

For reasons one can only speculate about, interpreting studies has long ignored the question of sex and gender, although sister disciplines had already paved the way. Gender studies in linguistics, for instance, go back to the works of Lakoff in the mid-1970s (Lakoff 1975) and had reached translation studies by the end of the 1980s (von Flotow 2010). Interpreting studies would let another two decades pass before embracing the concept with the first chapter on gender by Angelelli (2004). Some have wondered at this delay (Baer & Massardier-Kenney 2016; Singy & Guex 2015).

With the exception of psycholinguistic and cognitive process approaches, where interpreting studies traditionally led the pack, the epistemological development of the discipline has generally been slower than that of its sister disciplines (Gile 2009). Interpreting studies embraced functional perspectives after they were already firmly in place in translation studies; it adopted corpus-based methods more than 30 years after linguistics and more than ten years after translation studies. The belated interest in gender could be considered one more area where the discipline has had to catch up with others. Considering that interpreting attracts fewer researchers than linguistics or translation, a delay seems perfectly explicable.

However, it should also be said that women have some rather strong historical claims on interpreting research. Women were at the forefront of the first technological turn of the profession, when they participated in the first experiments with simultaneous interpreting at the International Labour Organization (Baigorri 2004). Women also came to play more prominent roles in interpreting training and research at an earlier stage than in translation. As early as the 1970s, two women, Danica Seleskovitch and Barbara Moser-Mercer, dominated the field intellectually. Yet, the influence of women in the development of the discipline did not seem to spark interest for the topic of gender and sex until recently. Or could it be that due to the prominent role played by women, studying gender, and potential gender issues, was deemed less pressing in interpreting studies?

Literary studies did much to draw translation scholars’ attention to the influence of gender in translation (von Flotow 2010). Interpreting does not have the same connection with literary studies, which could also explain to a certain extent the belated interest. However, it is
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well connected with psychology and psycholinguistics in particular, fields in which differences between the sexes are a prominent object of study. Recruitment problems may very well have prevented researchers to take sex on board in interpreting research: the available population is limited in size, fairly reluctant to participate in research (Shlesinger 1998) and heavily biased in favour of women. According to the latest available figures, women make up 75 per cent of the workforce (Diriker 2013) with similar proportions in student populations (Lim 2005). Finding a balanced population sizeable enough to enable reliable research on sex as a factor in interpreting is a challenge researchers tend to shy away from. It is perhaps no wonder that the topic was eventually taken up by researchers using other methods than experimental ones.

Concepts

Although the available literature on sex or gender in interpreting uses the concepts in ambiguous ways (see section ‘A cautionary tale’ below) and the term ‘gender’ is more common today, it is necessary to clearly distinguish them (Haig 2004; Udry 1994). Sex refers to a person’s biological sex, is binary and is generally assigned at birth (with the exception of intersex individuals who have biological sex characteristics that complicate sex assignment). Gender either refers to a person’s gender identity, i.e. the internal and personal identification to a certain gender, or a person’s gender role, i.e. a range of behaviours that are considered appropriate for an individual by society based on their assigned sex (World Health Organization 2015). As a consequence, a person’s sex and gender do not always align (Prince 2005).

Rationale

Regardless of the reasons why sex and gender set in so late as topics of research, it is worth asking if there really is a need to know more about their role in interpreting. We think there is for a number of reasons. Since Pöchhacker (1994) and Wadensjö (1998), it is generally acknowledged that interpreters are fully fledged participants in the interaction. Their identities, ideologies, etc. do not suddenly disappear when they take on the role of interpreters (Singy & Guex 2015), nor do their gender identities. This is why in particular areas, most notably in media interpreting (Katan & Straniero Sergio 2003; see also Falbo, Chapter 7, in this volume) and in health care (Binder et al. 2012; Kuo & Fagan 1999), gender matching practices are observed: preference is given to interpreters whose gender matches the gender of at least one of the primary participants.

Little is known about the success of such practices and the available evidence is discordant. Kuo and Fagan (1999) found no higher degree of patient satisfaction in gender-matched healthcare encounters than in unmatched ones, whereas Binder et al. (2012) report that unmatched encounters are felt by physicians to hinder communication with patients. More research, and empirical research in particular, is therefore needed to determine the real impact of interpreters’ gender on communication in multiple settings, including in conference interpreting.

Other language-related disciplines have taught us that sex- and gender-based differences in cognitive skills and linguistic patterns exist (see sections ‘Differentiated cognitive skills and interpreter output’ and ‘Elements of divergent socialisation’ below). As interpreting is a linguistic activity, it would be rather surprising if differences found for other linguistic tasks did not apply in the case of interpreting, which bears the question how these differences interfere with ethical principles, such as faithfulness and completeness, and with user expectations. Mason (2008), for instance, relates the frequent omissions of the pragmatic marker well by
male interpreters to lower memory skills in the male population in general. However, the evidence is scarce and the causal relationship suggested by Mason (2008) between sex-related cognitive skills and interpreting is unsubstantiated.

It is also true that many interpreters probably enjoy the most intensive kind of language training one can be offered and are also made abundantly aware of the norms that govern the activity and the profession (Schjoldager 1995). Both language training and training in norms are gender-neutral. We might thus just as well expect pre-extant sex- and gender differences to be levelled out by the training interpreters enjoy. If this were not the case, interpreter trainers around the world would be well-advised to integrate a sex and gender dimension in their teaching to compensate for potential differences. Similarly, expertise and, more in particular, interpreters’ membership of specific communities of practice, such as the European Parliament (Duflou 2016) are likely to have a levelling effect on gender differences. In any case, much of the fundamental research is still to be carried out.

Finally, the research effort could also usefully inform students’ and early career interpreters’ choices. At a very early age, boys and girls learn which professions are considered appropriate for their gender and are therefore being pushed towards different subject areas (Eden 2017; Rees 1998). University enrolment statistics tend to confirm this trend: girls are more numerous in arts and humanities while boys make up the majority in science and technology (Symeonaki & Filopoulou 2017). As mentioned earlier, interpreting is predominantly a female profession. Three out of four active professional interpreters are women (Diriker 2013). Research into the careers, motivations and experiences of interpreters is of the utmost importance to understand where this imbalance originates and, if need be, how it could be undone. Two surveys carried out among male and female interpreters show that both genders agree that the gender imbalance in their profession is partly due to educational segregation (Hickey 2018; Ryan 2015). In general, male and female interpreters seem to have very similar motivations to enter the profession: the flexibility, the remuneration (a factor more important for men than women), as well as the excitement and meaningfulness of the profession. However, male interpreters also mention the prestige associated with the profession as a determining factor. The issue of prestige is often mentioned when discussing the feminisation of the profession, in particular, its declining prestige (Gentile 2018; Hickey 2018; Pöchhacker 2004), which could be a factor in its decreasing attractiveness to male candidates (see also Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume).

Moreover, sex differences in career choices can be explained by a widespread belief of different natural abilities or cognitive strengths (Barone 2011; Miller & Halpern 2014). In the case of interpreting, the impression of a female advantage in verbal skills could influence men and women’s career choices. This impression was again confirmed by male interpreters in a survey: they associate the gender imbalance in their profession with a superior female aptitude for languages and communication (Ryan 2015). This impression is, however, not shared by women, who do not think that they have a predisposition for interpreting (Hickey 2018). Gender stereotypes and the resulting educational segregation could deter men from enrolling in a training programme. Moreover, if unchallenged by research, their impression of a female superiority could also have an impact on their performances, given that people’s performances appear weaker when they are told that the other sex performs better at the task (Spencer et al. 1999). Studies on cognitive sex differences could therefore help eliminate stereotypes and potentially increase the gender balance in training programmes. Finally, seeing that genders prioritise different quality criteria for interpreting (Collados Aís 2006), the results of aptitude tests and accreditation procedures may depend to a significant extent on the gender composition of the jury. Research into gendered quality perceptions may help raise awareness and increase fairness.
In the following sub-sections, we will give an overview of the available empirical research on gender differences in interpreting placing it in the broader context of research on cognitive and sociolinguistic differences. We will assume that the former are more connected to sex and the latter more to gender, although the likelihood of cross-effects between cognitive processes and sociolinguistic features is, of course, high.

Differentiated cognitive skills and related output differences in interpreting

The inclusion of sex as a potential factor in interpreting research is inspired by observed sex differences in other areas. Neuroscientists started exploring potential sex differences in brain structures in order to better understand differences in the prevalence of psychological disorders and traits between men and women (Aleman et al. 2003). However, tying pathologies to differences in the brain was not successful, as many studies showed contradictory results or non-significant differences. In order to draw reliable conclusions, researchers conduct meta-analyses on specific areas of the brain. These meta-analyses concluded, for example, that no sex differences exist in amygdala volume (responsible for memory and decision-making) (Marwha et al. 2016), nor with regard to the hippocampus (active in the consolidation of information from short-term memory to long-term memory) (Tan et al. 2016). Similarly, no significant differences were found regarding lateralisation of brain functions (Chiarello et al. 2009; Sommer et al. 2008). In any case, researchers found weak correlations between brain structures and performance in cognitive tests (Pietschnig et al. 2015) which means that differences in brain structures would not systematically imply differences in abilities. When it comes to the brain of interpreters, sex has not been included as a factor in neuroscientific studies, although brain studies of interpreters are available (Ahrens et al. 2010; Hervais-Adelman & Babcock 2019; see also Hervais-Adelman, Chapter 34, in this volume). The low sample sizes with a majority of female participants or the desire to keep variation in the population to a minimum prevent for now a focus on sex differences.

Beyond the analysis of brain structures, researchers interested in potential sex differences turned to differences in actual behaviours, i.e. how each sex performs in specific tasks. Several studies aim at determining whether sex differences exist as a whole or with respect to traditional categories of cognitive abilities—verbal, mathematical and spatial—and conclude that men and women are much more similar than they are different (Hyde 2005; Miller & Halpern 2014). However, when analysing specific individual tasks, significant differences are observed. For example, studies found that women perform better in tests on processing speed (Camarata & Woodcock 2006; Roivainen, 2011; Van der Sluis et al. 2006) and perceptual speed (Born et al. 1987; Hedges & Nowell 1995), as well as speech sounds discrimination (Aerts et al. 2013). Sex differences were also found for declarative memory (Maitland et al. 2004). Women were found to perform better than men on verbal and visuospatial episodic memory tasks (Herlitz et al. 1999), more specifically on recall tasks (retrieval from memory without a cue) and recognition tasks (retrieval with a cue) (Gale et al. 2007; Kimura & Seal 2003). When recall is combined with a distraction task, males reportedly perform better (Harness et al. 2008).

Sex is rarely included in studies on memory in interpreting (see Hodzik & Williams, Chapter 26, in this volume). Collard (2019) looked at sex differences in the rendition of numbers in interpreting, with the assumption that the female advantage would translate into higher performance, but found no significant differences. Similarly, Collard et al. (2019) looked at extraposition in SOV languages (Dutch and German), a phenomenon where speakers
place constituents after the final verb instead of placing them in the verbal brace. It is believed that this strategy helps saving memory space and men have been shown to extrapose more constituents than women (Jansen 1978), potentially due to the female advantage in memory tasks. However, no sex differences were found in interpreting.

Sex differences were found in verbal fluency, which plays a key role in interpreting (Stavrakaki et al. 2012). These studies generally show higher performance for women (Maitland et al. 2004). Researchers also studied sex differences in the occurrence of disfluencies. Several studies on spontaneous language found that men produce more filled pauses (Shriberg 1996) and repeats (Bortfeld et al. 2001) than women but no differences were found for other types of disfluencies. This difference was tested for simultaneous interpreting with mixed results. In an experimental setting, Cecot (2001) found that women produce more filled pauses than men while men produce more and longer silent pauses. In a study of interpreters at the European Parliament, Collard and Defrancq (2020) found more lengthenings and longer silent pauses for men. No differences were found for filled pauses, false starts and the frequency of silent pauses.

Summing up, some ground has been covered in the area of sex-based differences in interpreters’ cognitive skills, mainly based on observation of behavioural patterns. However, results are mostly inconclusive or contradictory. This should not entirely come as a surprise, as there is a considerable gap between the methods used in (neuro)psychology and interpreting studies. The interpreting task is of such complexity that it is extremely difficult to filter out the effect of a single feature. Efforts will therefore be needed to bridge that gap and to devise methods that are both sensitive enough to be able to pick up faint signals and ecologically valid in that they still reflect the interpreting activity.

Elements of divergent socialisation

In societies at large, girls and boys, men and women are often socialised differently. In childhood, they already learn different patterns of social interaction (Goodwin 1980; Lever 1976). Girls tend to engage in activities where they need to create cooperation, to establish and keep relationships of equality and closeness. Boys, on the other hand, rather take part in larger groups with a hierarchical structure where they learn to challenge others—by means of assertive or even aggressive behaviour—in order to maintain their status and position (Maltz & Borker 1982).

This socialisation process may lead them to internalise roles, norms and values linked with a particular gender. A stereotypical role associated with the female workforce is that of caregiver (Abbott & Meerabeau 1998), hence a strong female presence in nursing, teaching and social work and a stronger propensity to stress the private life component in the work-life balance (Lips 2014). On the downside, professions typically associated with women are subordinate with regard to male professions, devalued and paid less. As a result, the female workforce suffers various forms of discrimination, both as a group and individually and shows lower degrees of self-esteem (Ridgeway 2009). Sociolinguistic research has been concerned with the possible linguistic impact of different socialisation processes and has therefore focused on the following question: do men and women speak in different ways? The next section will focus on two determinants of gendered speech in conference interpreting: power/cooperation and norms.

Power and cooperation

Early research in the field of power dates back to the 1970s when Lakoff (1975) argued in her seminal work that men and women are taught to speak in different ways. In contrast to
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a powerful and dominant male style, women tend to adopt more hesitant and cooperative styles. Women are encouraged to use specific linguistic cues—such as hedges or question tags—and to avoid others—such as taboo language. Altogether, the feminine style, according to Lakoff (1975) is politer and more tentative. Men, on the other hand, have a wider range of linguistic cues—such as swearing—and interactional features—such as floor management and interruptions—which give them, according to Lakoff (1975), the power to dominate women in society. In the following years, researchers set out to confirm or challenge Lakoff’s claims, especially in the field of politeness. In this vein, many scholars seem to agree to a certain extent that men and women speak differently (Coates 1993; 1996; Kramer 1978), and there is some evidence that women are overall more polite linguistically than men: they avoid harsh language (Kramer 1978), tend to avoid performing face-threatening acts (Brown 1990), and express more positive politeness through facilitative tags and pragmatic particles (Holmes 1995). More recent studies suggested that gender asymmetry depends on the item under study (Beeching et al. 2002) or that gender in itself is not a determinant of hedging behaviour but can be involved in an interplay of different contextual variables (Escalera 2009). It should be pointed out that the recent literature on gender patterns has abandoned the previously used binary definitions of gender (see section ‘A cautionary tale’ below) and that, although still widely cited, the research presented here is not uncontroversial in contemporaneous scholarship. Rather than associating gender with a particular power status, contemporaneous scholars approach power status performatively regardless of gender (Mills 2012).

This should not, however, prevent us from asking the fundamental questions again with regard to mediated linguistic genres and interpreting in particular: do female and male interpreters’ outputs differ in terms of the aforementioned features? Do both genders act differently when encountering face-threatening acts coming from speakers? Does a female style of interpreting represent primary participants as more polite or cooperative? Are interpreting strategies (see Riccardi, Chapter 27, in this volume) gendered because of different levels of self-confidence in genders? These are only some of the questions that still need thorough investigation in interpreting studies.

So far, only a handful of scholars have included a gender variable in their research—generally as a side parameter in studies with completely different foci (Angelelli 2004; Cecot 2001; Mason 2008; Nakane 2008; Ng 1992). Interestingly, Angelelli (2004) concluded that male and female interpreters (including court, medical and conference interpreters) do not perceive their roles significantly differently. Yet, it would seem that gendered patterns exist in the output of interpreters. Mason (2008) found some evidence in courtroom interpreting that female interpreters tend to add politeness markers when interpreting longer turns and omit markers of deference, which she explained by referring to a bigger focus on hierarchy in male upbringing and on cooperation in female upbringing. Adopting a corpus-based approach, Magnifico and Defrancq (2016) and (2017) studied the interpreters’ treatment of politeness in simultaneous interpreting in the European Parliament through the lens of face-threatening acts (FTAs) and hedges. Gender differences were observed in a corpus of 38 French speeches interpreted into two target languages, English and Dutch, but they do not always run along the expected lines. On the one hand, it appeared that female interpreters indeed outhedge their male colleagues and that this tendency is independent of target language, confirming the trend observed in spontaneous language (Magnifico & Defrancq 2017). Almost two-thirds of the hedges occurring in female interpretations are additions made by the interpreter, whereas in male interpretations, the share is only slightly more than a third. On the other hand, the reverse seems to be true of male and female handling of FTAs: men downtone and omit more unmitigated source FTAs whereas women render them more often with an equivalent FTA. For the
FTAs mitigated by the source speaker, no differences could be found. These results contradict not only the hypotheses put forward by the authors based on the literature, they also seem to be in contradiction with the results of the study on hedges. Magnifico and Defrancq (2017) try to explain the unexpected results by referring to greater norm compliance in female interpreting (see section ‘Norms, expectations and interpreters’ output’), an explanation that is categorically discarded by Bartłomiejczyk (2019). Drawing on a much larger corpus of English-Polish interpreting in the European Parliament, she found no significant differences between male and female handling of FTAs. Interestingly, she also pointed out that the lack of well-established codes of ethics in conference interpreting forbids explanations of gender differences in terms of norms governing the rendition of impoliteness. Rather, the frequent omission and downtoning of FTAs, which also characterise her data, are to be related to the interpreters’ agency in the shape of self-censorship. Self-censorship may even be encouraged by pedagogical principles advocated in textbooks, of which she quotes a number of examples. It is clear that more research will be needed on this point to find out what drives interpreters to handle FTAs the way they do and why gender differences manifest themselves in some datasets and not in others. Cultural drivers are probably also at work, as Bartłomiejczyk’s Polish data show a substantially higher tendency to downtone FTAs than Magnifico and Defrancq’s English and Dutch data. Cultural background is known to be a major factor in behavioural patterns regarding (im)politeness (Watts 2003).

Finally, two interesting studies on consecutive interpreting need to be mentioned that do not directly tie in with theoretical frameworks on gendered language patterns but can be related to the concept of group solidarity and cooperation. Łyda et al. (2010) studied agentless structures and nominalisations in consecutive renditions (English-Polish) by students and found that female students use three times more nominalisations when included in the group the text was about. Similarly, Łyda et al. (2011) studied deictic shifts and found these to be much more frequent in consecutive interpretations by female students than by male, especially when the source texts are evaluative. Female interpreters shift the deictic centre more in critical texts, while men shift more when they interpret praise. Shifts by female interpreters are also determined by in-group bias to a greater extent than shifts by male interpreters. Both tendencies seem to support the hypothesis that female students of interpreting are more influenced in their selection of linguistic features by projected group membership than male students.

The few available results in this area seem fairly promising for further research: interpreter training and community of practice membership do not completely erase gender-based tendencies reported for non-mediated language production. More detailed studies could lay bare the most resilient features of gendered interpreting. However, as for cognitive features, teasing apart the gender effect from broader tendencies, such as cultural background, remains a challenge.

Norms, expectations and interpreters’ output

Norms are meant to regulate behaviour and to guide a person’s choice in a specific situation. Interpreting is a norm-governed activity, where different types of norms are at work (Monacelli 2009; Schjoldager 1995; see also Pradas Macías & Zwischenberger, Chapter 19, in this volume). During their socialisation process, children not only learn a set of linguistic rules, but also acquire the cultural norms of spoken interaction (Coates 1993). In this respect, boys and girls distinguish the behaviours and roles associated with both genders and the activities which are seen as appropriate for each group. As a result, when norms are in play, gender
is one of the determining factors which will influence men and women in their choice of the norm(s) to abide by.

From a purely linguistic perspective, some evidence was found to confirm this pattern. Women appear to favour more standard and prestigious linguistic forms than men (Trudgill 1972). As for the underlying reasons, Chambers and Trudgill (1998) argued that women’s use of the more prestigious variant correlates with their sensitivity to the norms of ‘accepted behaviour’. Women are thought to develop such a sensitivity at an early age (Allred 1990). In more recent research, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) also observed that women use more standard grammar than men, and state that linguistic choices could be seen as the expression of a specific behaviour, where the use of nonstandard forms by men could be understood as a way of rebelling against authority.

Considering the patterns observed in spontaneous language, women and men might also prioritise different norms while interpreting. To find that out, different methods were used, targeting either declarative knowledge through the use of surveys, or procedural knowledge, through the use of observational data.

Striking discrepancies in responses for quality criteria have been found between male and female end-users of conference interpreting, as well as conference interpreters themselves (Iglesias Fernández 2013). A taxonomy of quality criteria was used in survey research on interpreting quality expectations (see also Pradas Macías & Zwischenberger, Chapter 19, in this volume), which first targeted conference interpreters (Bühler 1986), and later on end-users of conference interpreting (Kurz 1989; 1993; Moser 1996). These same criteria were used in surveys on end-users’ quality assessment (Collados Aís 1998; Collados Aís et al. 2007; Garzone 2003; Gile 1990; Iglesias Fernández 2007; Ng 1992; Pradas Macías 2003). These criteria encompass both the lexical-semantic and paralinguistic components of interpretation outputs.

Cumulative evidence from these surveys concurs with end-users attaching more importance to linguistic criteria (sense consistency with original, complete rendition, terminology, logical cohesion) than to paralinguistic criteria (fluency, intonation, diction, pleasant voice and accent). However, very soon researchers realised that the interpreting ‘packaging’ or non-verbal presentation significantly impacted the perception of semantic accuracy (Collados Aís 1998; Shlesinger 1994: 232). Empirical studies involving users’ assessment of actual instances of interpretation substantiated this assumption (Collados Aís 1998; Collados Aís et al. 2007; Garzone 2003; Iglesias Fernández 2007; Pradas Macías 2003). However, Ng’s survey (1992) showed females being more sensitive and concerned with paralinguistic and linguistic components than males, particularly with correct grammar, voice quality, speech rate and the interpreter’s lexical style. In a much larger survey involving different conference settings, Moser (1996) encountered a similar phenomenon: women conference-attendants were more irritated by the interpreter’s lack of ‘rhetorical skills’ than their male counterparts, in particular with regard to fluency, clarity of expression (diction) and lexical precision. Differences in quality priorities were also found in Collados Aís’s study (2006) aimed at exploring the impact of user’s sex and age on their quality preferences. Sex proved to be a differentiating factor as females ranked fluency at the second top criteria after accuracy, followed by logical cohesion, while males’ top three positions were given to purely linguistic components. Logical cohesion has been found to be linked to fluency perceived as ‘spoken oral proficiency’ (Pradas Macías 2003: 3), so females’ top-ranking positions involved more paralinguistic criteria than males’. Intrigued by findings on sex differences in interpreting quality preferences, Iglesias Fernández (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of three users’ quality expectations surveys (Collados Aís 2006; Collados Aís et al. 2007; Pradas Macías 2003), and one survey of conference interpreters’
quality preferences (Pradas Macías 2003). With a robust sample of 273 users and 36 interpreters (127 females and 131 males) the analysis reveals that male interpreters’ and male users’ priorities more often focus on semantic criteria than those of female users and interpreters. While males’ priorities were purely semantic-related, females’ responses gave prominence to both verbal and nonverbal criteria, and their ratings were higher for paralinguistic components, especially for fluency, intonation, pleasant voice and appropriate style.

These findings are in line with neuroanatomical sex differences found in the brain (Yamasue et al. 2008), which evidence female advantage in identifying emotional prosody in language processing (Schirmer et al. 2005) and in performing cognitive tasks involving interpersonal sensitivity and emotional recognition (Kimura 1999).

A cautionary tale

It should be pointed out that the available studies all explore gender and sex as binary categories and are therefore representative of an approach that would qualify as dated in gender studies. Indeed, the recent literature on gender has challenged the male-female dichotomy and has moved the focus from mutually exclusive categories towards a continuum (Bergvall et al 2011; Butler 1990). Masculine and feminine features should not be oversimplified and applied to all members of one group as each individual can develop these features to a certain extent. A gender continuum is therefore needed to include more recent concepts, such as ‘transgender’, ‘bigender’ and ‘gender fluidity’ and to give a broader perspective to those whose gender does not (entirely) align with the sex they were assigned at birth. On a related note, gender is more and more perceived as a complex feature which needs to be studied within a broader framework. Contemporaneous scholars (McCall 2005; Mills 2003; Shields 2008) plead for an intersectional perspective for gender research, allowing inclusion of other factors which constitute a person’s identity such as education, age, sexual orientation, class and race.

Also, the way sex or gender identification is carried out is unclear or debatable in some cases. In questionnaire-based methods (Angelelli 2004), participants can self-identify (albeit usually in binary terms), but in most studies using other methods, researchers seem to carry out that task. Identification based on voice is used in some corpus studies (Bartłomiejczyk 2019; Collard 2019; Magnifico & Defrancq 2016, 2017). Voice recognition is mostly carried out manually. According to Lass and Puffenberg (1971), human listeners are able to identify speaker sex with an accuracy of over 95 per cent. Collard and Defrancq (2019) report on a comparative analysis of human and machine identification carried out with the LIUM SpkDiarization software (Rouvier et al. 2013) concluding that human inter-rater agreement was higher than human-machine agreement. In other research, however, no precise identification method for sex and gender is described (Mason 2008).

To connect with mainstream research in gender studies, better methods will be required to determine sex and gender. Ideally, the identification task lies with participants and not with researchers and leaves enough room for non-binary identifications. This is likely to hamper research to a certain extent, as an increase in gender or sex categories makes it more difficult to attain certain thresholds of participants.

Finally, it is still unclear how sampling is best carried out. If three out of four interpreters are women, should this proportion be reflected in research? This is a fundamental epistemological question rarely touched upon in Interpreting Studies. Given the results of previous research, it seems advisable for descriptive Interpreting Studies, i.e. analytical work aiming at a description of interpreting as such, to use a sample representative of the population. For experimental
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research a sex/gender-balanced sample is required to control for the potential effects of sex and gender as independent variables (Korpal 2016). Given the difficulties faced by researchers to recruit interpreters for experimental research, it is hardly surprising that so many studies fall short of this requirement.

Conclusion

The overview of the literature offered in the previous sections shows how interdisciplinary sex and gender research in interpreting studies is. Most of the work draws inspiration from other fields of study, such as cognitive science, sociology, sociolinguistics and gender studies. Interpreting studies as a discipline lacks a common framework to account for sex- and gender-related phenomena.

As a result, the available research is fragmented: cognitive research does not intersect with sociolinguistics, nor does the research on quality. It is clear that future research would benefit enormously from such a common framework as it would allow for new and better targeted research questions. For instance, given the gendered assessment of prosodic features of interpreting, does this also mean that a gendered pattern exists in the prosody of male and female interpreters? Or, seeing that false starts and self-repairs are both disfluencies, how to explain the completely different results for these features?

A common framework would also help researchers integrate a sex and/or gender dimension in the studies they conduct. This seems to be necessary in some areas at least, as the available research indicates that gendered patterns exist. Failing to include the sex and/or gender dimension in these areas could lead to over-generalisation of research results.

The lack of systematic and comparable studies on sex and gender differences in interpreting does not allow for reliable conclusions to be drawn yet. However, this overview unveils a significant trend: while cognitive differences are hard to substantiate, evidence of sociolinguistic differences is found, suggesting that nurture has longer-lasting effects on interpreting than nature. However, one should bear in mind the methodological issues that still hamper a systematic investigation of sex differences in interpreting studies. Experimental data are usually scarce and unbalanced for sex, observational data, such as corpus data, are messy making it hard to tease apart the different factors that determine interpreting behaviour.

References


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