The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting

Michaela Albl-Mikasa, Elisabet Tiselius

Bridging the gap between conference interpreters and researchers with online media

Publication details
Sarah Hickey, Jonathan Downie, Alexander Gansmeier and Alexander Drechsel
Published online on: 30 Nov 2021

How to cite: Sarah Hickey, Jonathan Downie, Alexander Gansmeier and Alexander Drechsel. 30 Nov 2021, Bridging the gap between conference interpreters and researchers with online media from: The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting Routledge
Accessed on: 20 Jul 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Introduction

For most of its existence, the world of conference interpreting has remained relatively stable. Following the Nuremberg Trials, when simultaneous interpreting first came into the public eye, the use of freelance and staff interpreters steadily grew. By now, interpreting has evolved into a thriving field and the global market for all interpreting services is estimated to be worth US$7.6 billion (Nimdzi Insights 2019). While conference interpreters catered first to international bodies, they would later also provide their services to internationally minded small and medium-sized companies and multi-billion-dollar multinationals alike. At the same time, interpreters at the European Union or the United Nations (see Graves, Pascual Olaguibel & Pearson, Chapter 8, and Ruiz Rosendo & Diur, Chapter 9, in this volume) have enabled ever closer economic and political integration in many parts of the world. After the first school for interpreters opened in Mannheim in 1930, more and more universities opened interpreting courses, and interpreting studies eventually came into its own as an academic field (see Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez & Payás, Chapter 1, in this volume), thanks to curious practitioner-researchers (‘practisearchers’) and experts from other fields who took an interest (see Gile 1995; Pöchhacker 2016; and the discussion of the issues involved in practisearching in Tiselius 2018).

Compared to translation, however, interpreting was slow to embrace technology. While translators went from pen and paper to typewriters, then from dictation to computer-assisted translation tools, interpreters benefitted from upgrades to conference technology but were more or less unaffected by more profound technological disruption—until the advent of remote simultaneous interpreting (Fantinuoli, Chapter 36, and Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume).

First tests of remote simultaneous interpreting in the European institutions go back as far as the early 1990s (Drechsel 2004), but the technology available back then was deemed insufficient, and the cognitive strain for interpreters was considerable (Mouzourakis 2006). A ‘remote interpreting winter’ ensued and may have led many interpreters to believe they would not need to engage with remote interpreting for a long time to come. The widespread adoption of broadband internet and new technologies like Web Real-Time Communication (WebRTC), however,
paved the way for a new generation of web-based remote interpreting solutions, threatening to disrupt traditional conference interpreting. A growing awareness of the environmental impact of conference travel and, as of early 2020, countless event cancellations due to the coronavirus pandemic, have brought remote interpreting to the forefront. Professional associations like the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), the UK Institute of Translation & Interpreting (ITI) and the Verband der Konferenzdolmetscher (VKD) im BDÜ e.V. (the German Association of Conference Interpreters) have published studies and position papers (AIIC 2019; ITI 2019; VKD 2019). In addition, the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Interpretation has also published results of tests on “simultaneous interpreting delivery platforms” (Directorate-General for Interpretation 2019).

**New challenges in conference interpreting**

The growth of remote simultaneous interpreting might be considered a harbinger of further technological challenges. With technology companies like Amazon, Google and Microsoft investing heavily in artificial intelligence, machine interpreting, or speech-to-speech translation, these programs are sometimes advertised as a fully-fledged alternative to human interpreters for certain scenarios like travel. The implications of this technology for human interpreting have been discussed by Downie (2019).

These technological shifts put pressure on conference interpreters to upgrade their knowledge and skills so they can offer their clients relevant services, using appropriate technological solutions. This might require knowledge and insight that only research can provide. Since interpretation lies at the intersection of language, technology and business, we posit that the terms ‘research’ should be understood more widely.

The definition of ‘research’ in this chapter goes beyond traditional academic output in the form of books, peer-reviewed articles and collected volumes. The last decade has seen the growth of non-academic, but still rigorous, research created by corporate entities, using a variety of established market research practices. Companies like Slator and Nimdzi Insights offer new perspectives on the language industry with their market-focused research. They also have a different approach to communicating research findings, for example, through online video or social media.

Interpreter training courses can be quite short, and they often focus on the acquisition of core interpreting skills (see Kalina & Barranco-Droege, Chapter 24, in this volume). Personal experience shows that trainers often find it difficult to cover the many aspects of the interpreting profession in the time available. (For an overview of the many sub-skills, see Albl-Mikasa 2012.) Interpreting technology, for instance, ranges from online research strategies to terminology management and remote interpreting platforms (see Fantinuoli, Chapter 26, this volume). Familiarising students with a multitude of tools that tend to change frequently is a challenge. So in addition to traditional interpreting studies and to learning from more experienced peers (Albl-Mikasa 2013), language industry research can contribute to enhancing knowledge and skills in the profession.

Once interpreters practise their profession, they often find it hard to follow the latest developments in interpreting studies and (need to) focus on more commercial concerns such as building a freelance business. In short, those looking to get anything more from practising interpreters than a cursory nod in the general direction of research or occasional participation in experiments must answer a simple question: Why should freelance interpreters care about research if—in their opinion—it is not going to help them do their job on a daily basis? Professional conference interpreters may perceive a gap between academic research and their
Conference interpreters and researchers

professional practice. As the next section will explain, this gap remains despite the unique nature of interpreting studies as a discipline where many academic researchers are themselves practitioners.

Exploring the research-practice gap

Unlike almost any other academic field, the roots of interpreting studies can be traced back to the fascination of interpreters in their own work, in addition to interest from researchers in existing academic fields, such as psychology. Early studies carried out by interpreters (Seleskovitch 1968) and experts from other fields (Gerver 1971; Goldman-Eisler 1972) explored precisely how interpreters were able to perform their work. Some of the earliest book-length publications (Seleskovitch 1968; 1975) were aimed more at enabling the training of interpreters and justifying a set of core ideas than they were at providing a solid theoretical basis for research.

It can be argued that since the establishment of interpreting studies as an academic field, there has been a perceived growing gap between what researchers are interested in and what interpreters consider useful for their practice (see also Gile & Barranco-Droege, Chapter 25, in this volume). As Downie and Turner (2015: 156) state, “The prevailing research paradigm is for researchers to conceive, design, run and analyse their studies without any input from outside stakeholders.” In short, researchers, even practisearchers, have tended to pursue topics of interest to them, creating theories, methods, and analyses without in-depth involvement of other interpreters, users, or buyers in the process, except as research subjects. The control of the research process is still almost entirely in the hands of those within academia.

The decision by AIIC to begin to fund “suitable research projects that serve the interpreting profession” (AIIC 2020) can be read as a reaction to an increased perceived need for more engagement between the profession and research. One of the motivations for a professional association seeking to fund research in this way might be that existing structures were deemed insufficient to promote such engagement.

Commercial interpreting business and market research

As stated earlier, academia is not the only provider of research in interpreting. A new stream of research has emerged from outside the academic sphere. Entities such as Slator and Nimdzi Insights provide interested stakeholders with information about and insight into the language industry from a commercial point of view. These outlets communicate their findings mostly online, including via social media or through video and audio material. The different perspectives and more modern communication are potentially more appealing for interpreters who want to stay informed about the latest developments in their market.

Slator was founded in 2015 and has become an important source of business news from the language industry. It reports on mergers and acquisitions, annual reports of large language service providers (LSPs), legal developments and other industry news. Slator also offers commercial reports and consulting services and hosts its own conference series. Slator’s news and podcast can be accessed for free, whereas most of their market research is behind a paywall.

Nimdzi Insights was founded in 2017 and is a market research and international consulting company with a dedicated interpreting researcher. The company has, for example, analysed the size and state of the global interpreting market, assessed interpreting technology, and written about mental health issues concerning interpreters. Nimdzi’s market-sizing reports and articles can be accessed for free, whereas larger Insights Reports are paid products.
The continued existence, and growth, of commercial outlets like the two described above indicate that there is a business case for this kind of research in the language industry. While academic research largely focuses on theories about the practice of interpreting, companies like Nimdzi Insights and Slator produce new, actionable knowledge about the business of interpreting and interpreting technology. This knowledge is disseminated via reports, briefings, webinars, and e-learning courses aimed at businesses and practitioners alike. The challenge for interpreting researchers in academia, or even practisearchers, is to demonstrate how the knowledge they generate responds to the felt needs of practitioners who are not active in academic research. If practitioners outside of academia are to see academic research as important, a need that is both ethically and practically relevant if researchers wish to continue to gain practitioner support, then it is incumbent upon researchers to explain why practitioners should care about research. Put simply, if academic researchers wish to use practitioners as a source of data, they must learn to see them as an important stakeholder in their work.

A simple first step could be to rethink dissemination strategies, for example, as far as conferences are concerned. Events like Conf1nt 100 in Geneva in September 2019 and the regular Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT) congresses aim at bringing together research and practitioner audiences. Most events, however, are targeted, explicitly or implicitly, at one specific demographic. The conferences organised by the European Society for Translation Studies (EST), the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies (IATIS), or the American Translation and Interpreting Studies Association (ATISA) tend to naturally attract participants from academia, as do academic seminars. This improves dissemination of research among those already engaged in such work but is likely to play only a limited role in reaching beyond the confines of academia.

The conferences run by professional associations, such as AIIC, ITI, ATA and others around the world, are geared towards practitioners and therefore focus more on content with practical or inspirational value and less on research dissemination. Any research that is presented will need to be presented in a practitioner-oriented way.

Academic researchers, who wish to engage practitioners, should therefore plan their research dissemination with that audience and its preferred modes of learning in mind, sharing up-to-date and practical information on new and upcoming developments in the market. One example for conference delegates extending the reach of a given conference beyond the physical and temporal space where it is happening is the practice of ‘live-tweeting’. Delegates use social media platforms like Twitter to post information, personal impressions, pictures, or quotes from the event. An officially designated or informally agreed hashtag ensures that posts can be linked to the event in question. Popular industry events will often carry the discussion around key topics well beyond the actual conference.

Similarly, blog posts on conferences, which are often promoted on social media using the conference hashtag, also expand the debate by presenting summaries from the point of view of one particular attendee. These longer contributions tend to draw links between different sessions and speakers.

There may be more coverage of conferences on social media and in blogs, but it is inherently ephemeral and usually linked to a specific event. That on its own is likely not enough to bridge the gap between research and practice, and between researchers and practitioners. The need for activities that are continuous and comprehensive is underlined by the complexity of the markets in which interpreters work and by the growing number of skills they need to acquire and refine. The next section will therefore examine social media and their use by conference interpreting practitioners.
Online media in the interpreting space

Interpreting itself has been a rather ‘analogue’ activity for a long time. Sweeping changes have mostly occurred on the margins: digitalisation and globalisation have revolutionised how interpreters run their business, acquire clients, book their travel, or find and manage assignments.

The same applies to the way the industry communicates. Social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter have become indispensable tools for interpreters (and those who either want to become or book one). A major benefit of these online platforms is the change in ‘style’: communicating with potential partners, clients or peers online is direct and immediate, eschewing hierarchy and gatekeepers. As long as the ‘handle’ is known, reaching out to individuals around the globe and interacting with them directly are trivial, although it can sometimes be tricky to cut through the noise.

Due to this availability—and potential oversupply—of input and communication, the boom of social media has brought about the concept of influencers. Simply put, “a social media influencer is a user on social media who has established credibility in a specific industry. A social media influencer has access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach” (Pixlee n.d.).

People looking for, say, a good restaurant are likely going to listen to a close friend whom they know has expertise in this matter. People wanting to buy a new smartphone are likely going to seek out the advice of technology experts. The influencer marketing economy has taken this concept and run with it, while taking many forms, from “blogger reviews, social media mentions, celebrity endorsements and more. In some cases, content is sponsored, meaning that money changes hands. In others, the company sends products to influencers in exchange for a review” (Chaney 2016).

While influencers in the food or cosmetics sector have huge followings and generate a sizeable income, the language industry, and interpreting in particular, mostly have micro-influencers, with an audience between ‘only’ 5,000 and 10,000 followers, but a higher-than-average user engagement. Prominent professionals like Lourdes de Rioja or Andrew Gillies could be considered authoritative sources of interpretation-specific content for a particular target audience. The adoption and use of social media in large parts of the profession open up possibilities to close or at least reduce the research-practice gap. It will require careful dialogue between practitioners and researchers, and indeed practisearchers. What is required for this to happen will be discussed in the next and final section of this chapter.

Whose job is it to bridge the gap?

At the final session of the conference celebrating 100 years of conference interpreting, (Faculté de traduction et d’interprétation [UNIGE] 2019), the relationship between research and practice was discussed, invoking the question whether research should act as a bulwark to reinforce existing practices or be free to probe and question them, especially given that empirical results do not always support professional claims. The discussion was inconclusive, but the freedom of research, of course, is not up for debate.

There is no reason to assume interpreters would not see research as relevant and interesting. On the other hand, it is not the responsibility of researchers to merely provide the profession with desired outcomes or cover particular topics of interest to practitioners. Interpreters might well appreciate research supporting the importance of speakers moderating their speed (Gerver 1971) and findings on difficulties arising from video remote interpreting (Braun &
Taylor 2012). Yet, there is a history of interpreters not appreciating when research questions the ideas they hold dear. Involving practitioners in research as subjects or gathering their input through questionnaires is useful and important. However, it does not ensure that practitioners develop an interest in how research works or that they engage with findings that run counter to conventional wisdom in the profession.

Ebru Diriker’s study (Diriker 2004), which showed a wide gap between the way conference interpreters speak about their work and the work they actually deliver, is a case in point. One reviewer (Matthews 2006) dismissed its importance, asserting this was only a single study. Any suggestion that the interpreters in the study were not behaving professionally can easily be quashed by referencing similar shifts found in the performance of simultaneous interpreters by other researchers, such as Monacelli (2009), with Downie (2020) arguing that shifts like these are common across all interpreting contexts. There is therefore no evidence that the most fundamental shifts seen in Diriker’s (2004) work, such as changes in pronoun use, are in any way atypical. Another controversial topic is the idea of conference interpreters as active participants in events, which is challenging previously held ideas about neutrality (Beaton 2007; Diriker 2004; Eraslan 2011). There has been effort expended in defending these ideas in one form or another (Ozolins 2016; Zimanyi 2009).

Research on the use of technology in interpreting, however, does seem to have hit a chord. Exploratory research on “simultaneous-consecutive interpreting” (Hamidi & Pöchhacker 2007; Orlando 2014), which is a mode enabled by modern audio recording equipment, formed an important foundation for practice with training courses on its use now appearing (El Metwally & eCPD Webinars 2017). It would seem that the capacity of research to inform, educate, and challenge can only be fulfilled when the research is both read by practising interpreters and seen to be relevant to their work.

Reducing the gap between research and practice therefore means encouraging researchers to make their work accessible and attractive to practitioners while at the same time encouraging professionals to be open to the findings of research, even where they might be controversial. In this context, social media would seem to present an ideal platform. Researchers could be encouraged to blog about their research, like Elisabet Tiselius does on Interpretings.net. YouTube channels, such as the ones run by Anthony Pym, Jonathan Downie or Lourdes de Rioja, are affording more space for academic and commercial researchers to explain their findings to an interested audience. In addition, the growth of open access and research publication hubs, such as Kudos and SocArXiv are encouraging researchers to explain their work in everyday terms.

**Conclusion**

Making research accessible and available for public debate is a good start. Partnerships such as the ITI’s Research Network are encouraging practitioners, researchers and practisearchers to collaborate in defining, building and disseminating research together. In the future, research should inform and challenge practice, in ways that are both theoretically and commercially stimulating. Coupling existing academic publishing repositories with the audiences available through social media platforms and professional associations therefore provides opportunities for academics to circulate their research outside of academia and to build partnerships while they are doing their research.

Another step forward would be to encourage both practitioners and researchers to share and debate findings and opinions openly and freely without fear of upsetting the status quo. This open exchange should happen both in person, at conferences, as well as in the virtual realm in
the form of blog posts and discussions on social media or on podcasts such as The Troublesome Terps. For an honest, forward-looking debate to be successful, it will require two things. One is “both researchers and practitioners taking the risks involved with challenging the prevailing norms” (Downie 2017). The other is an attitudinal shift within the larger interpreting community that allows researchers and practitioners alike to express opinions and share findings that might go against the grain. Open debate between bright minds is a pillar of academia. Interpreting should be no exception.

Disclaimer

Alexander Drechsel’s contribution is in a personal capacity. The information and views set out therein are his and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission.

References


