

Interpreting for Canadian Students at the University of Havana: Some Ethical and Pedagogical Considerations

Lyse Hébert
York University
Toronto, Canada

Abstract

Interpreting lectures at the University of Havana for Canadian undergraduate students brings a pedagogical dimension to the interpreter's already complex task of negotiating difference in language and culture. In such a context, the responsibility for ensuring intelligibility and appropriateness of the knowledge being imparted is shared between the Canadian interpreter and the Cuban lecturer. This uniquely collaborative environment provides grounds for looking at interpretation as a dialogic exchange between lecturer, students and interpreter.

This paper examines some issues arising from a recent experience involving Queen's University students, and suggests that the pedagogical goal of providing a practical engagement with social, political and cultural issues in Cuba confers new responsibilities on the interpreter. To what extent is this perception of the interpreter's role as co-instructor shared by lecturers and students? How can the interpreter address the ethical challenges presented by this dual role?

1. INTRODUCTION

Recognition of the cultural agency of translators and interpreters is now a *fait accompli*. Indeed, numerous translation theorists such as Barbara Folkart and Sherry Simon, and several feminist translators such as Barbara Godard, have argued convincingly that translation is a form of writing, an original production rather than simply a reproduction of meaning produced by others. The cultural turn taken by translation studies, the contributions of *Skopostheorie* and of Del Hymes' ethnography of communication, and the application of methods of sociological inquiry all offer new avenues for analyses that take into account both the role of the translator/interpreter as a cultural agent, and the contexts in which texts are produced and received.

And if, as Barbara Folkart (1981) demonstrates, re-enunciation — which includes interpretation — is a communicative act, then this concept of agency leads us to define interpretation as a “communicative event in a given

communication situation” (Pöchhacker 2001: 412). This communicative event is further characterized by the dialogic interaction of linguistic, cultural and contextual factors. Indeed, in some circumstances, “cultural mediation” becomes a crucial element of the interpretive act.

The implications of this definition of interpretation are particularly evident in the context presented here, that is, the interpretation of lectures given at the University of Havana, by Cuban faculty members, for Queen’s University undergraduate students.

In May 2004, I interpreted the three-hour lectures at the University of Havana for this group of 35 Queen’s students. This two-week Development Ethics course organized jointly with the University of Havana course is offered for credit to the Canadian students and, as such, must meet identified and measurable learning objectives. Prior to arriving in Havana, the students attend a certain number of “pre-departure lectures” and are given a “course kit” containing relevant readings.

The course focuses on various issues relating to Cuba’s history and current circumstances, and lecturers provide a Cuban perspective on a wide range of topics ranging from the literacy campaign of 1961, to the thought of José Martí. Its objective is to provide a practical engagement with social, political and cultural issues in Cuba.

One year prior to interpreting these sessions, I attended the course as an observer, which lead me to reflect on the challenges faced by the Queen’s professor who acted as interpreter. Subsequent discussions with this interpreter brought to light our fundamental differences of opinion regarding the communicative importance of specific elements of Cuban discourse, as well as discrepancies in our underlying assumptions about the means by which the interpreter should ensure that the pedagogical goals of the course are met. However, our shared conviction of the immense value of Cuban perspectives for

understanding essential and universal realities of human existence lead us to pursue these discussions, which, to my great benefit, continue to this day¹.

The purpose of this paper and forthcoming research is to explore the links between Cuban discourse as an expression of cultural identity and the pedagogical goal of interpreting this discourse for Canadians in culturally appropriate terms. How does the interpreter negotiate this dual role?

University lectures: a special case

Consecutive interpretation of university lectures places all participants — lecturers, students and interpreter — in a dialogic situation requiring, at least on the part of lecturers and interpreter, implicit recognition of the particular factors impacting communication. More specifically, these University of Havana faculty members are imparting information that is not only new, but also in many cases based on research and academic traditions that, as a result of Cuba's isolation, are conceptually foreign for Canadian students. This raises important questions as to the communicability of the information.

In an article published in *Meta*, in 2000, Claudia Angelelli proposes Del Hymes' theory of communication as a tool for analyzing interpretation as a communicative event. Indeed, Hymes' "ethnography of communication" provides a useful taxonomy of speaking that is based on the concept of "speech community", which he defines as a "social, rather than a linguistic entity" (1974: 47). Angelelli convincingly demonstrates the applicability of the Hymesian model to both community and conference interpretation. However, I believe that the concept of speech community is especially useful for framing some of the ethical and pedagogical issues arising in the context of interpretation presented here.

As Angelelli points out, some principles of interpreting and translating are not necessarily applicable in all interpretation situations. In fact, it is irrelevant, in the context of university lectures given by Cuban scholars to an audience

¹ I am greatly indebted to Susan Babbitt for having given me the opportunity to interpret for the course, and especially for our ongoing discussions of the topic and her continued support for this research.

composed exclusively of Canadian students, to state that the goal of interpretation (and translation) is to produce the same effect on the target language audience as on the source language audience, since the lectures are tailored specifically for the former. In this case, the goal is emphatically a pedagogical one, and this confers on both the lecturer and the interpreter a responsibility for ensuring the intelligibility of the information, as well as its appropriateness to the knowledge level of the auditors. This, among other factors, is what transforms the act of interpreting into an agentive one, an act whose ultimate goal is not only to facilitate communication, but also to foster an understanding between members of two different speech communities.

Hymes' initial model was predicated on a concern for "the many anthropological, sociological, and psychological problems which invade the field of language" (1964: 2). He concluded that it was the study of communication, rather than language that would provide the most productive framework for understanding "the place of language in culture and society". To this end, he proposed three theoretical orientations: "emphasis and primacy of speech over code; function over structure; context over message" (1964: 11).

The first of these refers to Hymes' belief that one must take "the community or other context, rather than the code, as starting point". When talking about Cuba, one must carefully consider the terms "community" and "context", for they are extremely complex. And it is this very complexity that makes interpretation of Cuban discourse an exercise in cultural mediation. It implies that, in our case, interpretation would be seen first and foremost as a means of "interpreting" a specific (speech) community, focusing on the Cuban discourse as an expression of national, cultural and political identity, rather than on the language being used.

Hymes' second element underscores the need to recognize that the referential function of language is only one of its many functions, and that each of these gives rise to different "structural perspectives and organizations". Thus, if the interpreter in the academic context described here fails to recognize that the structure of Cuban discourse is a reflection of its function as an expression of

identity, only part of the pedagogical goal will be achieved. For example, if, out of a concern for brevity, the interpreter were to occasionally render the expression “desde el triunfo de la Revolución²” as “since 1959”, the auditors would be deprived of the opportunity to witness, and reflect on, the function served by the reiteration of this conceptual framing of Cuban history.

Finally, the primacy of context over message, although problematic for interpreters, is especially manifest in the Cuban lecturers’ presentations to Canadian students. Frequent references to historical, geographic and political factors influencing the emergence of the Cuban State not only explicitly underscore the differences between Cuban and Canadian perceptions of identity, but also implicitly demonstrate important similarities.

Implications for the practice of interpretation in this context

What then, does this all mean for the interpreter in this pedagogical context? The first consequence of subscribing to this analytical model is, as stated previously, that the interpreter, whose primary focus has traditionally been the code, must now negotiate a new set of responsibilities to both speakers and auditors. Situated at the meeting point between two speech communities, she must develop an awareness of differences and similarities between these communities and, rather than attempting to simply reproduce the message, she must find tools, both linguistic and conceptual, that will maximize the communicative value of the message.

In practical terms, in addition to linguistic competence, the interpreter must possess “communicative competence” (Briggs 1988), as defined in both speech communities. In other words, she is constantly crossing not only the linguistic boundaries between speakers and auditors, but also the conceptual boundaries and, therefore, must use the forms recognized as appropriate by members of each community.

² Since the triumph of the Revolution.

Speakers' and auditors' expectations

Thus far, our arguments have foregrounded a theoretical framework for coming to terms with the interpreter's dilemmas. But what about the other participants in this communicative event: the speakers and auditors?

As a preliminary step to framing these arguments and verifying their usefulness for further research, I have begun a survey of the University of Havana lecturers, Queen's students, and observers who attended lectures in various capacities. While only a small number of questionnaires have been returned at the time of writing, some significant factors are emerging. What follows is a description of these very partial results.

It is important, when looking at this data, to keep in mind that the student groups are heterogeneous: their areas of study range from nursing to political science and Spanish literature; their Spanish language skills vary from non-existent to fluent; and their knowledge of development issues in general, and of Cuba in particular, is for the most part limited. Observers, on the other hand, are usually familiar with the Cuban context, although their linguistic skills also vary.

The Cuban lecturers are all members of faculty at the University of Havana, and their presentations focus on their particular area of expertise. Most, if not all, have traveled and studied abroad, and have previous experience working with interpreters. While most have been exposed to foreign student groups, their knowledge of the Canadian context is, with three notable exceptions, generally limited. At least one lecturer speaks English fluently enough to dispense with the services of an interpreter, whereas the majority have sufficient comprehension skills to follow the interpreter's rendering of their speech.

While students are keenly aware of the challenges posed by this "practical engagement with difference", the Cuban lecturers are conscious of participating in a social project. They understand that their verbal interaction with Canadian students "shape a new context for the action that will follow" (Goodwin and Duranti 1992: 29), that is a context in which these students will be better equipped to think independently about Cuba.

As can be expected, there are fundamental similarities in the expectations of all participants in these lectures. Even though respondents do not appear to distinguish between the interpreter's responsibilities toward the speaker and her role vis-à-vis the audience, most cite "reducing the language barrier", "accuracy", "clarity", or "faithfulness", the primary objective in all circumstances. Some refer to the need for a "synergy" between lecturer and interpreter, and others even equate the latter's role to that of a "facilitator".

When asked what impact the particular context (Cuban material presented in Spanish to Canadian students) has on the role of the interpreter, some respondents demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of this particular learning experience, and of the need for cultural mediation. One student says that, since some Cuban lecturers may provide examples and interpretations that "would not necessarily be understood by a Canadian audience", interpreting "may involve not translating literally but rather finding appropriate examples with the same meaning in our culture rather than theirs". This requires, in this respondent's view, great familiarity "with both cultures and with the topics discussed". In fact, all students recognize, implicitly or explicitly, this role of cultural mediation.

It should be noted that responses from observers, many of whom are or have been instructors in the Canadian context, are grounded in pedagogical aims. One respondent says that "because there is a gap between what speaker and audience can take for granted as common knowledge, the interpreter can play a valuable role mediating between these differences in background in order to facilitate better and more productive communication". This respondent also believes that "this can be a very educational process for the speaker as well as [for] the students". The imparting of knowledge then becomes a prime objective because "since the lectures [...] are part of a course and not a conference, the interpreter has the added responsibility of making sure that the students comprehend what is being said". Some state that the interpreter's task is "to communicate as clearly as possible the speaker's intended meaning", which can require "brief asides to make novel concepts or references accessible".

It should be emphasized, however, that although all respondents believe that the interpreter should “clarify the meaning of some terms or phrases” and/or “explain historical references, show links with readings or other lectures”, none state that the interpreter should “leave out non-relevant or repetitive information”.

Although only one lecturer has responded thus far, it is worthwhile to note that “intercambio³” stands out as the primary objective of this instructor’s activity. She further states that her experiences with these groups, both in and out of the classroom have had a very positive effect on her, both as a professor and as a human being.

The most interesting comments provided by this initial group of respondents relate to perceptions of the interpreter’s responsibility for clarifying unknown concepts as well as historical, political and cultural references and whether this leads to viewing the interpreter as co-instructor. The majority of respondents thus far consider the role of instructor to be shared by the lecturer and the interpreter. Indeed, even those who state that the lecturer is the sole instructor expect the interpreter to focus on the “essence of the message”, to be “aware when a message is not being understood”, and to provide “explanation during or after the translation”, as required.

While the number of lecturer respondents is, thus far, insufficient to allow a comparison of expectations between speakers and auditors, I hope to also examine this factor with a view to formulating a more complete description of interpretation in this context. Nonetheless, this last result clearly demonstrates that all participants expect, to some extent, that the interpreter will mediate the communication. This points to an understanding on their part of the agency of the interpreter.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework outlined here provides for a broader conceptualization of the role of the interpreter. By explicitly foregrounding the speech communities involved and the functions of pedagogical discourse in a particular national and

³ Exchange.

cultural context, we can open the way for research in interpreting that is less concerned with the “text” than with the communicative event. And, when a communicative event is explicitly aimed at “fair and constructive critical engagement” with issues of difference and sameness⁴, it is no longer sufficient for interpreters to limit their focus to the code and to be complacent in their “awareness” of cultural difference. In fact, interpretation can be a site for engaging critically with the politics of difference. Given the current global pressures towards the blurring of cultural differences, and given the fact that we, as interpreters, are increasingly called upon to participate in forums where this agenda is being played out, we have a moral responsibility to foster an understanding of the links between discourse and identity.

REFERENCES

- Angelelli, Claudia (2000). “Interpretation as a Communicative Event: A Look through Hymes’ Lenses”, *Meta*, XLV, 4, p. 580-592.
- Briggs, Charles L. (1988). *Performance in Communication*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Folkart, Barbara (1981). *Le conflit des énonciations — traduction et discours rapporté*, Cadiac: Les Éditions Balzac.
- Goodwin, Charles and Alessandro Duranti (1992). “Rethinking Context: An Introduction”, in *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-42.
- Hymes, Del (1964). “Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication”, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 66, no 6, part 2, pp. 1-34.
- Pöchhacker, Franz (2001). “Quality Assessment in Conference and Community Interpreting”, *Meta*, XLVI, 2, p. 410-425.

⁴ See Susan Babbitt “Stories from ‘the South’: A Question of Logic”, forthcoming in *Hypatia; Journal of Feminist Philosophy*.