

TRANSLATION AS A MEDIATING ACTIVITY: THE INFLUENCE OF  
TRANSLATION METAPHORS IN RESEARCH, PRACTISE AND  
TRAINING OF COMMUNITY INTERPRETING

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ABSTRACT

One of the metaphors many authors have chosen to describe translation is that of the mediating activity. If we take a look at the bibliography on community interpreting that has been published during the last decades, this will enable us to check to what extent this vision of the interpreter as a mediator is present in many of the works published on the field. The idea that the role inhabited by the interpreter requires more than just translate can be found in many of them. In this article, we intend to analyze the influence of this metaphor of mediation in the proposals made by researchers on this field and to check what has been its influence in research, practice and training.

KEYWORDS: metaphor, mediation, community interpreting.

RESUMEN

Entre las metáforas que muchos autores han utilizado para describir la traducción está la de la mediación. Una ojeada a la bibliografía publicada en las últimas décadas sobre interpretación en los servicios públicos nos permite comprobar hasta qué punto esa visión del intérprete como mediador está presente en muchas de las obras escritas al respecto. La idea de que el papel del intérprete no se reduce únicamente a la de reproductor de enunciados lingüísticos se halla latente en muchos de ellos. En este artículo, pretendemos analizar la influencia de esta metáfora de la mediación en las propuestas realizadas por los investigadores de este ámbito y comprobar cuál ha sido su repercusión en la investigación, la práctica y la docencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: metáfora, mediación, interpretación en los servicios públicos.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research on community interpreting is a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, Mikkelsen stated in 1996 (cited by Torres 2003: 447) that “Community interpreting today is, in many ways, at the stage where conference interpreting was 50 years ago”. Some authors claim that research began in this field in 1978, when both Lang and Harris published their reflections and perceptions of some special features they had observed when analysing the behaviour of untrained natural bilinguals or trained interpreters in court and in a wide variety of contexts. They highlighted some special aspects such as role conflict, in-group loyalties, participation status, relevance and negotiation of face. In their opinion, such matters merited consideration as an object of study because in traditional conference interpreting they had been disregarded as irrelevant. Others consider the 1990s to be when systematic research on community interpreting started, with the works of authors like Wadensjö, Gentile and Corsellis. In any event, there is a consensus that despite the young age of this field, research has already revealed interesting findings and, although the foundations have been laid, there are still some very promising areas to explore.

Turning to Roda P. Roberts’ (1997: 8-9) reflections on community interpreting and its scope in our modern and changing societies, the first aspect that may hold our attention is the multiplicity of designations used to refer to the same concept. Thus, we find terms such as community interpreting, public service interpreting, cultural interpreting, dialogue interpreting, bilateral interpreting, *ad hoc* interpreting, liaison interpreting, escort interpreting, medical or legal interpreting, etc. A common feature of these types of interpreting is that they are carried out in a setting other than a conference room. However, they cannot be seen as synonymous because they designate different kinds of interpreter-mediated events that are becoming more and more common in our everyday life. Although this form of interpreting dates back to very remote times, it was during the final decades of the past century that this ill-defined activity underwent considerable development, due to the political and historical circumstances present worldwide, and to the migrations that have brought people from different cultures and languages into contact in a way and, above all, in numbers that are unprecedented. This reality has created a need for various interpreting services that have emerged in every country where public or private institutions have felt that there was a gap to fill. In most cases, the implementation of interpreting services is linked to legal prescriptions related to integration policy and equal opportunities in several fields: justice, health, social services and education. In others, private interests are responsible for the growth of interpreting services which are created mainly for commercial reasons.

Everybody agrees that there are some common features in these different forms of interpreting, but it also seems quite evident that the terminology used reflects different approaches and different points of view concerning the role of the interpreter and the purpose of interpreting. We must bear in mind that speaking is never innocent, and behind the choice of a specific term there is a philosophical tendency and a particular vision of what is involved when we talk about an interpreting service. In this paper we will focus entirely on the interpreter-mediated events that are somehow related to public services. In our opinion, other types of interpreting, such as business or media interpreting, which may use the same techniques but are more business-oriented, have their own distinct features and should therefore be treated separately.

As an introduction to the study of the influence that the metaphor of translation as a mediating activity has had in the field of community interpreting, an essential starting point is the series of books entitled *The Critical Link: Interpreters in the Community 1-4*. These four volumes contain the most significant contributions from four conferences devoted entirely to community interpreting, all of them published within the last fifteen years. These conferences provided those attending with a unique opportunity to share the views, works and experiences of service providers, interpreters, users, scholars, students, etc. If we look at the tables of contents and read some of the papers included in these volumes, it becomes apparent that the role inhabited by interpreters, the limits of their duties and a clear definition of their responsibilities are at the heart of the discussions held over nine years. In the case of conference interpreting, there is no doubt about the interpreters' role and what is expected of them. However, in the case of community interpreting, most of the scholars, professionals and users of this kind of service seem to agree that the communicative and pragmatic situation in which community interpreters are working demands from them something more than mere translation. Roberts' statement (*ibidem*: 10-11) is illustrative of this:

“As the two primary participants do not know each other's language and language use conventions, the only person that can logically maintain, adjust, and if necessary repair problems in communication is the interpreter. This means that the interpreter is an active, third participant in the communication event, with the potential to influence both the direction and the outcome of the event.”

The problem arises when we try to clearly define the limits of this “something more”. Two statements could be made in relation to this. The first

one is that discussion is still in progress<sup>1</sup>, and it will probably continue to be in progress for some time, because the social reality associated with community interpreting services is changing at a dramatic pace in many countries around the world. And the context of this discussion, the attempt to describe what 'being a third participant' consists of, is where the value of the metaphor of translation can be measured, combining the ideas of Round (2005:54) and D'Hulst (1992:38), not so much because of what it tells us about translation itself, but because of how it has helped to advance research in this field, by relating the 'thème' and the 'phore', by exploring the new horizons to which this comparison between translation and its metaphors leads us. The second statement, also related to this, is that research carried out during the last 15 or 20 years, thanks to the cooperation between academic and public institutions, seems to confirm some opinions and intuitions shared by many of the people who are in contact on a daily basis with community interpreting services: service providers, interpreters and users. In all of them, the terms used to describe the communicative interaction in which interpreters participate, to refer to the tasks performed by the interpreters and to establish or assess the abilities and skills they need in their professional lives, seem to be influenced by the metaphor of the mediator. And this is true in the three fields we consider in this paper: research, practise and training. In the first field, scholars have been trying to find the appropriate framework to describe the role inhabited by the interpreter, turning to sociology and psychology and using terms such as 'cooperation', 'coparticipation', 'conciliator', 'gatekeeper' or 'advocacy', which clearly reflect the assumption that interpreters are not mere machine translating machines but active and visible participants. In the second field, the perception that service providers, users and interpreters may have about the role of interpreters is related to tasks such as 'explaining cultural differences', 'simplifying technical language' or 'omitting or summarizing utterances', just to give a few examples of how they mediate in the interaction. Finally, training reflects also this perception of the interpreter as a mediator using terms such as 'turn-taking abilities in conversation', 'interpersonal skills' or in the importance given to the use of the first or the third person.

In this paper, we intend to illustrate that the metaphor of the mediating activity has always been present in the research, practise and training of community interpreting. Although we are aware that we still lack empirical and descriptive works that map the changing situation of community interpreting all over the world, the analysis of today's literature reflects clearly, in our opinion, that this activity has always had a differentiating feature with regard to

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<sup>1</sup> Just to mention a single recent example of this on-going process, the main theme of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Public Service Interpreting, held at the University of Alcalá de Henares (Madrid) in 2008, was the relationship between translation and mediation.

other types of interpreting or translation activities. What in other cases related to translation or interpreting, as activities carried out between languages and cultures, may be assumed implicitly or even disregarded for lack of relevance, in community interpreting, it acquires a special importance that makes scholars, practitioners and instructors treat it more explicitly and explore the sometimes confusing paths to which this characteristic lead us.

## 2. THE METAPHOR OF THE MEDIATING ACTIVITY IN THE RESEARCH ON COMMUNITY INTERPRETING

In the paper by Roda P. Roberts (*ibidem*) mentioned above, the author tries to describe the situation of community interpreting in the present day, whilst expounding a series of questions concerning some features and aspects of this activity that are still in need of a consensus-building process. Scholars seem to differ in their opinions concerning some of these issues, and interpreting services also have different views. Finally, real practices and expectations of the participants in interpreter-mediated events are far from homogeneous. But one of the main goals of community interpreting nowadays is professionalization, and the road to professionalization demands appropriate standards. Among the features that seem to characterize community interpreting, including medical or legal interpreting, in contrast to other kinds of interpreting services, she mentions the following: active participation, assistance, cultural brokering, advocacy and conciliation. This is the framework in which community interpreting seems to be placed nowadays and, in our opinion, it is quite evident that many of the nouns and adjectives used to describe the nature of the work carried out by community interpreters within the boundaries of this changing activity remind us of the metaphor of the mediating activity. Furthermore, according to Sauvêtre (2000) and Valero and Dergam (2003), this vision of the interpreter as a real mediator has even reached legal recognition in some countries, where this special labour category has been created recently by the authorities, as is the case in some European countries like Spain or Italy, due to the increase in importance in the last few years of the phenomena related to immigration. But this is only one of the aspects highlighted by Roberts. In this section, we will use the categories mentioned by this author as a starting point to analyse the vision of different authors and research trends in community interpreting, in order to assess the extent to which their vision of this activity is influenced by the metaphor of the mediating procedure.

Beginning with the first category, we could say that considering interpreters to be active participants means believing that they are much more than uninvolved “conduits” and that these kinds of small-group setting where

interpreting takes place generally require a more interpersonal relationship between all of the participants. The same idea is adopted by many other authors (Gehrke 1993, Fenton 1995, Harris 2000 or Mason 1999, among them). The following statements clearly reflect a major tendency among scholars of community interpreting. Roy (1990: 85)

If interpreters are resolving overlap, offerings turns, and taking turns [through their knowledge of the linguistic system, the social situation, and how each participant used language to say what they meant], they are active at a level of participation beyond that of the simplistic conduit metaphor receiving information, changing its form to another language and producing the target form. (cited by Roberts)

And, especially, Wadensjö (1998:153-4)

In an interpreter-mediated encounter, one actor – the interpreter – is expected to actively, immediately and constantly engage in various aspects of sense making, while the primary interlocutors' understanding of interaction is assumed to be achieved with a certain delay and always via the mediating third party.

This author's contribution is especially relevant concerning active participation. A significant part of her research focused on the participation framework in which community interpreting is conducted. For the purposes of her research, she adapted some of Goffman's sociological concepts, such as 'footing' or 'alignment', applying these concepts to real interpreter-mediated events. She eventually demonstrated that interpreting, in the context that we are dealing with, consists of two different activities: translation of what is said and, in conjunction with this, coordination (mediation), to make the conversation possible. In addition to acting as a 'linguistic and cultural intermediary' who talks when one of the participants says something, translating to the other party, the interpreter must also intervene actively in the conversation in order to make the exchange of information fluent and useful.

Angelelli (2003: 16) goes even further, and when analysing the role of the interpreter in cross-cultural communication, she affirms that he/she behaves like any other individual with all of the social factors that may have an impact on an interpersonal relation.

In the model that I propose, the interpreter is visible with all the social and cultural factors that allow her/him to co-construct a definition of reality with the other co-participants to the interaction. The interpreter is present with all her/his deeply held

views on power, status, solidarity, gender, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic status, plus the cultural norms and blueprints of those social factors that are used by her/him to construct and interpret reality. As the interpreter communicative event (ICE) unfolds, the interpreter brings not just the knowledge of languages and the ability to language-switch or assign turns. The interpreter brings the self.”

In relation to this idea of active participation, other authors have noted that the reality of interpreter-mediated events and the expectations of users may distort the image of interpreters, in the sense that they do not understand the limits of the interpreters’ tasks, which may finally interfere in their duties, as Martin reminds (2003: 437). Valero (2003: 456) also mentions the complexity and the variety of situations in which community interpreting services can be found. She talks about “unity in diversity”, and she believes that this is the reason why it is so difficult to find common features and procedures within such an extensive area, where the level of involvement of the interpreters reflects a wide variety of options.

Even the field of legal interpreting, in which for many decades the idea was that the interpreters were there just to translate as accurately as possible and to leave legal interpretations for lawyers and judges, seems to have changed, if we are to believe Fenton’s statement (1997: 33).

Interpreters in the courtroom are far from being perceived by everyone else in the courtroom as non-thinking, mechanical or electronic devices, but rather as men and women in possession of special skills, the application of which requires good judgment and integrity, and who can be held accountable for their performances.”

In our opinion, the attempt made by all these authors to describe how interpreters are physically, emotionally and conceptually participating actively in a special communication event is a proof that all of them consider that they, somehow, intervene in what is said, and in how it is said, and rendered to the other participants. We do agree that this participation is a fundamental feature of community interpreting, even in those cases in which this might have been seen as an interference, as in the legal field. The acceptance of this imprecise level of intervention is what makes it difficult for interpreters and users to define the role expected of them.

Assistance is the second feature mentioned by Roberts to describe the nature of the role inhabited by the interpreters in face-to-face interaction contexts, and she states that this idea of ‘assistance’ or ‘service’ is very close to that of active participation and it is present in many definitions of community

interpreting. According to this author, there are three reasons that may explain this vision of the interpreter as someone who is there to 'help'. First of all, community interpreting is geared almost entirely towards the social service sector where many people are in need of some kind of assistance, so the interpreters are easily identified as an extension of the social worker. In addition, many people who work in this field are volunteers, so they see themselves just as helpers. Finally, people who use community interpreting services are generally new immigrants who do not know the language, the institutions or the culture of the receiving country, so they are seen to be in need of some kind of special help, not just interlinguistic mediation. Although she does not use the word 'assistance', in our opinion, the same notion of 'help' is present in the definition given by Martin (2000: 208), in which, considering the situation of Spain, she refers to the idea of people who are in need and who find themselves in a lower position compared to others.

Sea como fuere, la interpretación social tal y como se entiende hoy suele referirse al acceso a los servicios públicos por parte de sujetos que no dominan la lengua mayoritaria del país. Responde a una necesidad *social* de una *comunidad* de inmigrantes o personas que por una razón u otra no hablan el idioma mayoritario y por tanto se ven perjudicadas en su trato con la Administración y en el ejercicio de sus derechos y deberes a la hora de acceder a los servicios públicos.

In relation to this, the notion of assistance implies a situation of power imbalance (Alexieva, 1997:169), another common feature in community interpreting contexts. In this sense, we consider that mediation has been interpreted as an attempt to neutralize this asymmetry, in order to make the powerless feel more comfortable with the general situation he or she is going through. Although it is assumed that interpreters, as any other mediators, are not there to make decisions, but to ensure that the people who have to make them understand each other properly, so that any eventual resolution can be based on accurate information, their presence represents a warranty for the weaker part that his or her voice will be heard and that this might lead to raise his or her position. In this sense, interpreting means mediation.

A third aspect pointed out by Roberts is cultural brokering, referring to the importance of cultural elements in the communication process in which the interpreter is participating. One may think that talking about cultural aspects and its importance in translation or interpreting is not new, but the insistence on the fact that the cultural dimension might have a special significance in community interpreting is common to many authors, such as Valero and Dergam (2003: 263), who mention social, cultural and religious aspects as



crucial factors that should be taken into consideration by interpreters if they want their tasks to be properly fulfilled.

Garber (2000: 9-20), responsible for organising and supervising a community interpreting service, admits that although he doesn't like the term 'cultural interpreter', he normally uses it because he is aware that efficient community interpreters must always bear in mind that part of their job consists of dealing with cultural differences that may render communication difficult.

In our opinion, cultural brokering is another aspect of community interpreting in which the influence of the metaphor of the mediating activity seems more than evident. 'Brokering' and 'mediation', applied to cultural aspects, have practically the same meaning when referred to translation or interpreting activities, at least during the last decades. Since the cultural turn in Translation Studies took place around the 1980s, highlighting the importance of cultural factors in interlinguistic communication, they have been explicitly present in every theoretical approach adopted subsequently. They are considered as an element that merits special attention, from translators and interpreters, in coping with the expectancies of both the text producer and the target language reader. In the case of community interpreting, the presence of these elements is systematically described as a crucial part of the interpreter's task, in trying to avoid the interference of cultural differences in communication and in an attempt to make sure that information is being properly understood by each part. As Pöchhacker reminds us (2008: 11-2), mediation in linguistic and cultural elements, as inextricably intertwined, is what everyone assumes that any translational or interpreting activity consists of.

The fourth distinctive feature alluded to by Roberts is advocacy, which implies siding with one of the primary participants, generally the powerless. Citing Garber (*ibidem*:19) again, "Interpreters in community settings are nearly always placed in situations in which the powerless must face the powerful", which is not without consequences. This aspect is particularly sensitive because it affects not only the degree of participation of the interpreters in the conversation in which they are supposed to intervene as gatekeepers, where there seems to be unanimity, but also the nature of this intervention. On this issue, the opinions differ from one author to another or from one country to another. It usually depends on the philosophical approach of the interpreting service itself. Pöchhacker (2000: 50-1) states the following:

In the absence of commonly accepted standards of practice, the interpreter's task definition may be situated anywhere along the spectrum between those who would limit the interpreter's role to that of a linguistic conduit or 'language converter' and those who regard cultural brokering or advocacy as an integral component of the interpreter's role.

Roberts believes that advocacy should not be a task of the interpreter, in the sense that this may create distrust in one of the parties, rendering their main purpose, which is to assure fluent and fruitful communication, more difficult to achieve. Furthermore, this principle opposes neutrality, another distinctive feature widely accepted and recognised as a *sine qua non* condition for establishing a communicative framework in which two parties accept the intervention of a third party. As Niska reminds us (2007:301), referring to the code of ethics of community interpreters in Sweden, “The leading principle in this code is that the interpreter is neutral and impartial”. Nevertheless, as practices may differ depending on the institution concerned and on the philosophical trend that supports the role of the interpreters who work there, this idea is present in some interpreting services cited by Roberts, like the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship’s or the Alberta Vocational Centre’s *Community Interpreter Skills Training Program Curriculum Handbook*.

Other authors, like Pym (1999: 273), defend this approach and believe that deploying institutional advocacy is perhaps part of the interpreter’s role.

My account of the interpreter’s situation might have led to the conclusion that she toned down Rosa López’s language so as to protect the witness from traps laid by the prosecuting counsel. She might have done this out of solidarity: [...] The interpreter is there symbolically to cover over precisely the disadvantages of the foreign woman worker unskilled in communication. [...] This is not necessary unethical behaviour. The interpreter was perhaps only doing what the institution was paying her to do.

As we can see, opinions differ on this point, and not only as far as research is concerned but also when we examine the practice of different institutions, settings or countries. If we consider that many interpreting services are linked to social institutions and immigration policies, this difference may be related to the existence of differentiated integration models. In the European case, for example, according to Sauvêtre (2000), there are three models:

- a) The multicultural English model in which ethnic and linguistic minorities are recognized and so they must be treated according to its particularities.
- b) The French model, where integration is based not on cultural or ethnic aspects but on an individual and personal basis.
- c) The German model, in which different groups of people live separately inside the same society but there is no intention of integrating them.

It is easy to imagine that this general concept of how immigrants should behave in their new countries and the purpose for which the interpreting

service has been created, in relation to that assumption, will influence the definition of the role that the interpreter is supposed to assume. Moreover, this advocacy doesn't always have to be shown explicitly and sometimes the mechanisms displayed to support one of the parties can be very subtle, like in the case analysed by Pym, previously cited. In this regard, Valero and Dergam (ibidem: 263-4) remind us that some structural and non intentioned features of the interpreters, such as age, race, status or sex, become a part of the interpreting context and might have an influence in the development of the mediated event.

Sauvêtre (ibidem: 42) remarks that, in any case, the ideal situation is that in which both parties know and accept the participation rules so that the interpreters know exactly what is expected of them.

En effet, quelle que soit la démarche adoptée (interprétariat purement linguistique ou interprétariat culturel), tous insistent pour dire qu'elle doit être connue et acceptée par les parties en présence, seule façon pour l'interprète de ne pas s'égarer d'un chemin balisé par la neutralité et le secret professionnel qui sont respect du message et des personnes.

Just as we stated, when dealing with assistance, advocacy may be interpreted as an attempt to neutralize the situation of power imbalance in which the interpreting takes place; but in this case, the intervention of the interpreter goes even further than in the previous one. In relation to the metaphor of the mediating activity, we would say that this may be the only characteristic that doesn't correspond to the idea of an intermediary acting as a neutral third party, whose purpose is to help two parties to reach an agreement or, at least, a mutual understanding. Once the mediating third party is placed on one side of the triangle, not in the middle, mediation in the contractual sense analysed by Pöchhacker (2008: 16) is no longer possible. Nevertheless, turning to the cultural approach in Translation Studies mentioned above and to functionalism, it is not so difficult to find some analogies in the conceptual idea that, during the translation process, what must be kept in mind is especially what the target reader may need, and not so much what the author may have wanted to communicate to the reader of the original text, which also places somehow the translator in one side of the triangle. In this sense, we would conclude that advocacy may be theoretically far from some possible interpretations of mediation, but it is not so far from some commonly accepted translation practises which correspond to another possible definition of what intercultural mediation is.

The last aspect mentioned by Roberts is conciliation, introduced by Schneider in 1992 (cited by Roberts). This author defends the idea that the

interpreters' work combines, more often than we think, the role of interlinguistic and intercultural mediator with the role of a real conciliator in situations of conflict, even if this nuance is hardly ever explicitly included in their tasks. According to this author, some skills attributed to the interpreters, such as concealing personal emotions, remaining neutral and being able to summarize accurately, are useful for mediation purposes, although they would have to develop more skills, such as rewording or softening positions, if necessary, to avoid communication breakdown. This is very close to the figure of the 'cultural or linguistic interpreter', as described by Marcheggiani (2003: 6) when analysing the case of France and its immigration policies over recent decades. The author points out that this figure of 'cultural intermediary or mediator' was created in France in the 1970s in an attempt by the authorities to help new immigrants to adapt to their new country, according to their principles, on an individual basis. But during the 1980s, and later on, when the integration model of this country started to experience problems, immigrant associations claimed to transform these 'cultural interpreters' into speakers for the immigrants as a group and into real mediators.

The same situation can be described in Spain, where the number of immigrants arriving in recent years has been responsible for the creation of a special figure of 'intercultural mediator', according to Valero and Dergam (*ibidem*: 262), whose main purpose is to act as an interpreter in order to resolve situations of conflict. This figure is often called upon in contexts of integration problems and minority languages, which means that the skills required to access these jobs are not the usual standard accepted in other circumstances. Nevertheless, in our view, the interesting point in Valero and Dergam's analysis is the way they relate the skills of an (inter)cultural mediator, an interlinguistic mediator/translator/interpreter and a linguistic mediator. Like Schneider, they detect some areas of confluence between the social mediator and the intercultural or interlinguistic mediator:

- a) Acceptance of a 'third party' to intervene in the process.
- b) Helping both parties, remaining neutral.
- c) Lack of authority of the mediating party to make decisions.
- d) Trust of both parties in the mediator.
- e) Neutrality.
- f) Encouragement of the participation/involvement of both parties.

In addition, some other characteristics are also seen as common in the case of the interlinguistic mediator in the Spanish context.

- a) Inequalities in cultures and races of the two parties. i.e. physical, cultural, religious and linguistic differences, which may create tension.

- b) Implications of this difference in terms of prejudices, fears, stereotypes, that should be taken into consideration by the intercultural and interlinguistic mediator.
- c) Relevance of the cultural baggage of the mediator. There are different options when we try to identify who is the ideal mediator but, in any event, it should be someone with a great ability to mediate and especially sensitive to the issues to be dealt with.

We agree that this figure is very far from what is normally considered to be interpreting in many contexts but, as we mentioned in the introduction, the social reality with which community interpreting is associated is evolving so quickly that practice is constantly forcing scholars to revise their models and to redefine their concepts.

In relation to the conciliation activity as one of the community interpreters' tasks, we could mention another aspect that has merited both scholars and practitioners' attention because of the implications it may have for the interpreter. As Alexieva (1997:169) points out, interpreter-mediated events can be placed along a continuum where several parameters have to be considered, one them being 'shared goals' vs. 'conflicting goals'. It is not difficult to accept that when the objectives of both parties are similar, i.e. in a medical context, where the doctor and the patient want to evaluate a situation of illness and find an appropriate solution, the conciliation work to be carried out by the interpreter/mediator is enormously facilitated, but this is not always the case in community interpreting. In many circumstances, such as at an airport police station, where a police officer is denying a passenger entrance to the country (García Luque, 2006), or in a courtroom, where a public prosecutor is interrogating a defence witness, their intentions in the exchange of information that they are participating in are normally very different. This will increase the level of pressure on the interpreter and it is difficult to imagine how he/she could try to conciliate such divergent objectives. In relation to this issue, Taibi (2006:116) suggests that there should be more flexibility when conceiving the role of the community interpreter, depending on the context and on the individual circumstances of each encounter and participant.

As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, the metaphor of the mediating activity is present in many of the definitions, terms, statements and reflections of most of the scholars who devoted their work to achieve recognition and standards for a profession emerging in many countries.

### 3. THE METAPHOR OF THE MEDIATING ACTIVITY IN THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY INTERPRETING

The main purpose of this article was to explore the field of research on community interpreting in order to assess the extent to which the metaphor of translation as a bridge, as a mediating activity, has had an influence on the models and proposals made by scholars in this particular area of Translation Studies. Nevertheless, our view is that in this case, like in many other areas, there is a connection between research and practice, and the reality cannot be ignored by academic institutions. This connection is based upon two facts. The first is that part of the research carried out until now consists of empirical descriptive works aimed at providing a better account of the real tasks performed by the interpreters on a daily basis. And the second is that, in most of cases, the models proposed by scholars emerged as a result of the conclusions extracted from these descriptive research works, not to mention the cases in which research and practice are activities carried out by the same person simultaneously or at different moments of his/her life. This is why, in this section, we will briefly try to analyse the influence that the translation metaphors of the mediating activity may have also had on the daily work of community interpreters. To do so, we will comment on the results of some surveys and studies carried out with community interpreters from several different countries who work in various settings (health, legal field and social services) around the world. These countries are Mexico, the USA, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Spain, Austria and South Africa. We will focus on these countries because they are where several scholars have carried out empirical research on the perception that interpreters themselves, service providers and clients have of their role as interlinguistic mediators, together with the fact that they may be representative of the present situation of community interpreting around the world.

A first idea that seems to confirm one of the characteristics mentioned in the previous section by Roberts –active participation–, is expressed by Pöchhacker (2000: 62) when he affirms that

The views of more than 600 service providers in Austrian health care and social service settings clearly indicate that actual and potential users of community interpreting services expect interpreters to do much more than ‘just translate’.

Many of the references used in the literature to talk about the interpreter’s role are vague or imprecise nouns that are very difficult to evaluate, such as conduit, clarifier, advocate, helpmate, etc. This is why Pöchhacker (2000) based his research on questions about easily identifiable

acts. Some of the specific tasks which interpreters and users were asked about concerned issues like explaining cultural references, alerting parties to any misunderstanding in the conversation, simplifying technical language for clients, omitting or summarizing utterances which are not to the point to avoid wasting time, putting immediate follow-up questions to the clients or filling in forms with them. The perception of some particular tasks and the importance given to them by the users varied according to the service provider involved. For instance, social workers agreed almost unanimously that explaining cultural differences was a very important part of the interpreter's duty, while physicians or nurses did not have the same opinion.

As far as interpreters themselves are concerned, there were also significant differences depending on the setting in which they worked, i.e. family and youth institutions or healthcare, and also depending on the differences in their status, whether they were trained professionals, hospital staff with other language or sign language interpreters, who, in general, had a more comprehensive vision of their tasks.

Another study carried out by Angelelli (*ibidem*) shows that interpreters are always conscious of their visibility in any context. In this case, like with Pöchhacker, the conclusion of the survey is obtained through a set of questions concerning specific actions which interpreters were asked about. Some of these actions were communicating affect as well as message, explaining cultural gaps or establishing rules of communication during the conversation. As a main conclusion, she states the following:

The findings of the IPRI (interpersonal role inventory) provide that clear evidence that interpreter themselves did not consider their role to be invisible in any of the settings in which they worked.

Visibility and emotional involvement in the work of a community interpreter have also been studied by authors who focused on special conflict situations (Wiegand: 2000, Thomas 2003, Straker and Watts, 2003). According to Wiegand, who studied the case of South Africa and the role that interpreters played after the fall of the apartheid regime, in the context of the legal and social institutions which tried to repair some of the injustice of the previous period in their country's history, the visibility and level of involvement of the interpreter must be kept within the limits of neutrality. Even in situations in which emotions such as sadness, vengeance or fear might easily appear in all of the participants in the interaction, including the interpreters, they should always remain as uninvolved as possible and keep a distance. This visibility might otherwise be seen as a lack of professionalism.

Finally, we would like to mention the research that is being carried out on how interpreters adopt some particular strategies in order to keep communication going as one more of their duties, maybe the most important one, in the sense that they are responsible for “sustain[ing] a positive communicative atmosphere and keep the talk ‘going’” (Pöllabauer: 2007:47). When they feel a particular utterance may cause a negative reaction on the one of the parts, they tend to tone it down in order to avoid communication failure.

Thus, we would say that all the studies carried out during the last few years seem to confirm that interpreters conceive their work as something that goes beyond the reproduction of linguistic utterances in another language and this is what their day to day work reflects in different ways.

#### 4. THE METAPHOR OF THE MEDIATING ACTIVITY IN TRAINING OF COMMUNITY INTERPRETING

Before concluding this paper we would like to turn our attention to the field of training in community interpreting and to the influence that the metaphor of translation as a mediating activity has had in this area. As the connection between research and practice mentioned in the previous section of this paper, in our opinion the same connection can be found between research and training. The reason for this is probably the close relationship that can be established between research, practice and training. In many cases, the training programmes used to enable students to access community interpreting as a profession have been designed in accordance with the data extracted from real-life interpreter-mediated encounters through a research program carried out in academic institutions.

There are some pioneering countries in this field, including Australia, Canada and Sweden, each in a different continent. Other countries have implemented very different solutions, depending on the circumstances, tradition and linguistic policy of each of them, but in many cases private institutions are responsible for adopting short-term programs linked to the services given by these institutions. We can say as an overall perception that, as well as research and practice, training in community interpreting is also evolving according to the changing needs of our societies and many countries have still to reach a point that others, such as the three mentioned above, reached several decades ago. The main feature that these three countries have in common is that they have been the first to implement a university training framework to enable students to acquire the necessary skills for becoming a professional community interpreter. Some courses are shared with other forms of interpreting, simultaneous or consecutive interpreting, like interpreting techniques, terminology, or notions of the labour market. Nevertheless, some



subjects are specific to this special field of interpreting, such as speech analysis skills and turn-taking in conversation or interpersonal skills. But focussing on the figure of the interpreter as a mediator, which is the purpose of this paper, we should at this point highlight the importance attributed to psychological aspects and to ethics when interpreting in these special contexts (healthcare, justice or social services). Interpreters are taught to deal with different kinds of situations where the primary participants for whom they are serving as intermediaries may not have the same level of power. This may increase the pressure on the interpreter, who must be able to deal with these circumstances. As Garber reminds us (2000), interpreting may take place at a moment of 'crisis' in the life of the client. In many cases, a failure in the communication process or even the natural consequence of the process may result in an even more painful situation for the powerless person. Nevertheless, the interpreter is not responsible for making decisions concerning the consequences of what is been dealt with, and must always be aware that whatever these consequences may be, their purpose is just to ensure communication and equality of treatment. In some other cases, as mentioned by Valero and Dergam (2003), personal circumstances may interfere in the interpreter's attitude towards a client or a situation, and teaching them how to be professional implies enabling the future interpreter to handle this situation in such a way as to avoid getting too involved. In this regard, training programs in community interpreting tend to transmit the idea that acting as intercultural and interlinguistic mediators means to establish a compromise of neutrality with both parties and to give them the information they need in order to feel comfortable with the presence of a third person and to believe that this person is not hiding or manipulating anything that could alter the communication process, so that the interpreter becomes the bridge that keeps words coming and going and eventually will ensure the parties understand each other.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Remaining loyal to the idea mentioned in the introduction, namely that the value of a metaphor is not so much what it tells us about translation itself but how it advances research in this field by relating apparently distant concepts, we will demonstrate in what aspects the metaphor of the translator (interpreter in this case) has advanced community interpreting in the three areas covered by this paper: research, practice and training.

As far as research is concerned, we could say that this metaphor has helped to gain a better understanding of the following aspects:

- a) How is mediation actually carried out? What linguistic, sociological and psychological mechanisms do the community interpreters use to act as

effective intermediaries in face-to-face encounters? In this area, the contributions of Wadensjö or Roberts are very significant.

- b) What kind of skills and knowledge, practical or theoretical, do the community interpreters need in order to face their daily duties and to ensure that their purpose as links between individuals, cultures and communities is fulfilled? How should their work be combined with that of the service-providing institutions for which they work? What should the service providers, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, lawyers, judges, know in order to make the most of the interpreting service? On this issue, authors like Corsellis, Pöchhacker, Garber or Angelelli have made interesting contributions.
- c) Research is still in progress to establish a standard framework regarding the limits and the functions of community interpreters. There are some agreements regarding, for instance, the active participation of the interpreter, the visibility or the importance of cultural aspects in order to transmit not only what is said but also what is meant. Some other issues are in need of more research and debate. We still have to decide whether the mediation practice is merely linguistic and cultural, or if interpreters should also be used as real mediators in circumstances in which the mediation practice also affects the content and the consequences of the conversation in which the interpreter is acting as an intermediary. Although, theoretically, this figure is very far from what many authors understand as a community interpreter, research has shown that there are some areas of confluence and this figure is actually starting to emerge in some contexts.

As far as practice is concerned, the influence of the metaphor of the community interpreter as a mediator has helped us to see which specific tasks or activities reflect this perception of the gatekeeper and mediator between two people, two cultures or the link between an individual and an institution. It has also helped to clarify the expectations of service providers, users and interpreters about their role.

As far as training is concerned, we have seen how future interpreters are taught, the activities that are designed to qualify/enable them to cope with the requirements of every particular field in which they have to fulfil their tasks, and the ethical or psychological instruments that are provided to ensure a fruitful and fluid communication process, even in difficult circumstances.

We would like to end this paper by saying that, in our view, and according to Rumelhart (1979: 90), the metaphor of translators, in this case interpreters, as mediators, has been so fruitful and so interiorized by scholars, practitioners and trainers, that we can no longer treat it as a metaphor, but as an acquired literal meaning inherent to what translation or interpreting is.

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