

Ira Torresi

The Gender Issue in Interpreting Studies: A Review-Essay

Reviewed Works:

Weber, Orest, Pascal Singy and Patrice Guex (2005). "Gender and Interpreting in the Medical Sphere: What is at Stake?" In José Santaemilia (ed.), *Gender, Sex and Translation: The Manipulation of Identities*. Manchester: St. Jerome. 137-47.

Verdini, Agostina (2004). *La resa in interpretazione consecutiva: donne e uomini a confronto*. Unpublished dissertation. Forli: SSLiMIT, University of Bologna.

Three years have passed since Michael Cronin made a call for a new "cultural turn" in Interpreting Studies that would "explicitly address questions of power and issues such as class, gender, race in interpreting situations" (Cronin 2002: 387). What has been published since then on the connection between cultural factors or more specifically, gender issues and interpreting? Seemingly, not much. The two works reviewed in the following sections are rare examples of the introduction of the methods and viewpoints of Gender Studies into the realm of Interpreting Studies. They are different in many respects, both in form and content: in particular, the focus of Weber et al. is on community interpreting in healthcare settings, whereas Verdini looks at consecutive interpretation. But this difference motivates their both being reviewed here rather than separately, as they are clear illustrations of the different impact of the much-awaited "cultural turn" respectively in Community Interpreting Studies and Conference Interpreting Studies.

The study of community interpreting would appear to be more firmly grounded than that of conference interpreting in the investigation of the sociocultural context in which the interpreting event takes place, taking into account issues of neutrality, agency and power specific to the communication setting. This has allowed for a certain degree of reflection on non-linguistic dimensions: questions relating to the interpreter's role, for instance, have been analysed independently from actual linguistic production. The majority of works on conference interpreting, on the other hand, still tends to be focused on the interpreter's final product (delivery), whether to assess its quality or to use it as evidence of certain cognitive or physiological processes which take place in the interpreter's brain. A dichotomy therefore emerges, not only between Translation Studies and Interpreting Studies (as pointed out in Cronin 2002), but also between Community Interpreting Studies and Conference Interpreting Studies, in terms of different degrees of interdisciplinarity and openness to the methods and viewpoints of Gender Studies or, more generally, Cultural Studies. Sections 1 and 2 will discuss the details of each side of this dichotomy in relation to their respective 'champion' works, whereas some common conclusions will be drawn in section 3.

1. Weber, Orest, Pascal Singy and Patrice Guex (2005). "Gender and Interpreting in the Medical Sphere: What is at Stake?" In José Santaemilia (ed.), *Gender, Sex and Translation: The Manipulation of Identities*. Manchester: St. Jerome. 137-47.

The paper by Weber, Singy and Guex is part of a much broader action-research focusing on the importance of cultural mediators/interpreters in medical encounters. The interdisciplinarity of their work is evident from the very composition of the team of authors: two linguists (Singy and Weber) and a specialist in psychosocial medicine (Guex). Additionally, drawing on the notion of gender as a social construct which influences language use and conversation (e.g. Coates), from **the denial of the myth of the neutral interpreter by authors like Wadensjö**, and at the same time from feminist translators' efforts to make women more visible in the texts they translate, in their introduction the authors set up a truly interdisciplinary framework for their study, **that opens up the all too often closed circle of Interpreting Studies (Angelelli 2004b: 25) and establishes a contact between these**, Sociolinguistics, Gender Studies, and Feminist Translation Studies. Additional inputs, described in section 1, are provided by Sociology (e.g. Bourdieu and Goffman); the method adopted for field-work is that of focus groups (mediators/interpreters interviewed at different times and patients using or not using mediators/interpreters), analysed with a combination of content analysis, computational analysis and discourse analysis. Gender was discussed for ten minutes in each focus group, and was articulated in the initial question as the sex difference or concordance between the patient, interpreter/mediator and medical professional (p. 140).

Given this particular definition of 'gender' provided by the researchers, it is hardly surprising that no participant in the focus groups ever mentioned the linguistic dimension of gender in the sense of the different encoding of femaleness/maleness and femininity/masculinity across languages (cf. Tyolwana 1999: 218-19). Only psychological and cultural aspects emerged, such as: (a) women interpreters are sometimes perceived as more suited to work in gynaecology, paediatrics and in general with woman patients, who might see a male interpreter as an 'incursion' in what they see as a 'woman's world'; and (b) taboos such as sexuality, Aids, rape and violence in the couple are thought to be better tackled by interpreters of the same sex as the patient (section 2.2). Overall, however, patients not using mediators/interpreters and more experienced interpreters/mediators tended to minimise the possibility of sex difference hindering communication (2.1). Experienced interpreters/mediators, in particular, seemed to be worried that attaching excessive importance to gender issues would give hospitals and physicians an excuse to exclude them from medical encounters, simply because they may not be of the same sex as the patient (2.3). The authors acknowledge that this concern is far from unfounded, as some physicians do indeed seem to view the interpreter as a cumbersome presence rather than a facilitator (p. 146). They therefore suggest, very pragmatically, to "reopen the discussion among the interpreters about gender issues in their professional practice once their position is no longer threatened" (p.147). It is to be hoped, then, that their work succeeds in its aim of advocating the introduction of *professional* cultural mediators/interpreters in Swiss hospitals, by helping healthcare institutions understand the importance of such figures in reducing the communication (i.e., linguistic and cultural) gap between medical professionals and migrant patients.

Considerations about the importance for migrant women to be given the right to choose the gender of the public service (esp. healthcare) interpreter assisting them are also voiced by the much earlier research report of the "Interpreting for Women Project" funded by the Australian Government (Pardy 1995) and its precursor (McRobbie and Jupp 1993). It should be noted that Pardy's conclusions do not seem to contrast with interpreters' interests, as the professionals interviewed by Weber, Singy and Guex (2005) seem to fear. On the contrary, the Australian report recommends that more (female) interpreters be hired by public service providers, in order to cater for the gender requirements of end-users (Pardy 1995: 52). This seems to suggest that as early as ten years ago the Australian situation concerning community interpreting allowed for claims and recommendations that are not easily conceivable in today's Switzerland, on the grounds of migrants' right to gain full access to public services. Interestingly, in 1999, Cape Town's Valkenberg psychiatric hospital seemed to have independently adopted the point of view of Pardy and her colleagues, employing a male interpreter for the male ward and a female interpreter for the female ward (Drennan 1999). Similarly, "male/female demand" is listed by Corsellis (1999: 200) among the selection criteria for a training program in community interpreter training, while the South African healthcare interpreting training program described by Ntshona (1999) was only aimed at women, although the author does not specify whether this choice was made on account of the end-users' needs or because of the intention to promote female employability through specialization in language services.

Other studies provide further evidence of the need for professional health interpreters trained in gender-sensitive issues, with particular reference to female patients. Crezee (2003: 252 and 259) provides an account of a New Zealand cervical cancer study during which several non-native-speakers of English did not object to being excluded from treatment simply because in their cultures it was not admissible for a woman patient to question the doctor's decisions (they were not assisted by interpreters/mediators). [1] Another case where linguistic and cultural misunderstanding caused substantial harm to a woman patient is illustrated by Bowen and Kaufert (2003: 269-70). A migrant woman, who was not assisted by an interpreter but by her husband (whose command of English was only limited), was not properly informed about the kind of procedure she was subjected to when she received a Pap smear test at a Canadian institution. As she thought she had been sterilized (which she had previously asked for), she discontinued contraceptive measures, consequently became pregnant, and had to undergo therapeutic abortion. Martinsen (2002: 258) reports other instances where misinterpretation in the health sector had tragic results: a Somali couple did not show for Aids treatment because the interpreter from Danish had translated "HIV-positive" with "positive result of the test" (Aids being one of the taboos mentioned in Weber, Singy and Guex 2005); due to one hospital's reliance on the patients' husbands rather than professional interpreters, a woman was sterilized against her will and another received an abortion, similarly against her will. Those two husbands might have misinterpreted out of inexperience, but Dallari, Previti and Ricci (2005: 188) point out that misinterpreting by family members can be intentional when conflicts of interest arise: for instance, domestic violence will most probably be reported as an 'accident' by the perpetrator, often the victim's husband. In all such circumstances, a professional interpreting service could have provided migrant women with a physical and symbolic voice, while it would seem that instead most hospitals only focus on language transfer, without taking the cultural and social context of the medical encounter (or the patient's personal situation) into account. The same applies to cases where a male patient is reluctant to expose his body in the presence of a woman interpreter, due to cultural taboos: this often happens with Muslim patients, but is unacceptable to Western eyes, generating misunderstandings and prejudice (Delli Ponti and Forlivesi 2005: 198-99). Although the evidence produced by these papers is only anecdotal, it helps us to understand the consequences of inadequate or non-existent interpreting services on women's and men's sexuality and health in general, thus firmly anchoring the gender discourse in interpreting to professional practice.

Two theoretical works that directly address the gender issue in community interpreting are Rudvin 2005 and Eighinger and Karlin 2003. Given its collocation in a handbook for students of a Gender Studies course, Rudvin 2005 is not based on empirical data, but provides an interesting overview of the several dimensions of an interpreter-mediated event between migrants and public services that could be influenced by gender issues, and how this influence might impact on mediated communication. Eighinger and Karlin, on the other hand, argue that interpreting as sociolinguistic process and ethical practice can be looked at through the lens of the feminist-relational approach which brings into play notions such as power, domination and social justice, and reveals the interpreter not as an inert 'conduit' but as an 'agent'.

This is functional to the ever-growing discourse in favour of the acknowledgement of the community interpreter's visibility, agency, and non-neutrality, and against the myth of the interpreter's invisibility that is so frequent in the discourse of professional associations and evident in the description of the interpreter's role through objectifying metaphors (Rudvin 2002, Angelelli 2004b: 19-22, Roy 2002 [orig. 1993], Tate and Turner 2002 [orig. 1997]). [2] According to the visibility discourse,

The interpreter is present with all her/his deeply held views on power, status, solidarity, gender [...]. The interpreter brings the self. The self cannot be artificially blocked as the [I]nterpreted [C]ommunicative [E]vent unfolds to create the illusion of an 'invisible interpreter'. The interpreter is 'opaque' rather than 'transparent', 'visible', not 'invisible.'

(Angelelli 2003: 16)

A notable attempt at incorporating such discourse into interpreter training, encouraging students to become aware of their stance and non-neutral role in "power-laden, gender-bound" situations is provided by Ulyatt 1999, which also advocates an interdisciplinary approach and the use of Discourse Analysis in interpreter training as well as in Interpreting Studies.

Extensive fieldwork has established that community interpreters do in fact take the initiative to modify the original text in order to adjust it to the target culture and communicative setting (e.g., Wadensjö 2002 [orig. 1993]). The interpreter is visible as a gendered presence in the courtroom setting: Berk-Seligson (2002 [orig. 1988]: 280) has found that when answering a male attorney through a female interpreter, Spanish-speaking witnesses tend to use the polite address form *señora* rather than *señor*, making it clear that they are addressing the interpreter rather than the attorney, thus implicitly negating the 'invisible conduit' metaphor. Shifting from data-driven research to anecdotal accounts, an Italian professional police interpreter, Cocchi (2005:

226-27), describes her strategies to bridge the cultural gap between Nigerian women and Italian police officers, which would otherwise result in the women's accounts being dismissed as inconsistent. Cocchi takes the initiative of becoming the women's agent and hears the women before the actual questioning, independently sorts out information that would be confusing to an Italian mind (e.g., the use of "sister" for any woman friend, fuzzy time and space indications), and reconstructs the story so that it can be easily understood by the police officer. Of course, this procedure – which seems to be highly effective from the communicative point of view – cannot be adopted when the questioned person is a possible perpetrator or key witness; Cocchi reports taking agency only for prostitutes who accept to report their pimps, which is *per se* a partial, non-neutral choice and leaves us wondering to what extent it is motivated by the interpreter's gender identification with the person she assists. An answer to this is provided by Alexieva:

the social status of the interpreter, as well as his or her level of education, age and *gender* may also contribute to the level of equilibrium or tension in an interpreter-mediated event [...]. Interpreters may be tempted to exceed their brief, or definition of their role, where they feel superior to either speaker or addressee in terms of age, *gender*, knowledge of topic [...], communicative skills, or command not only of the source and target languages but also of the respective cultures and specific norms of behaviour relevant to the communicative situation.

(Alexieva 2002 [orig. 1997]: 226, my emphasis)

An ambivalent discourse, trying to reconcile the ethics of invisibility with the reality of visibility, is that produced by Gentile, Ozolins and Vasilakakos: " *issues of bias* of an ethnic, social, political, cultural or even gender nature can arise. [...] However, the professional liaison interpreter must behave impartially" and, should this prove impossible with particular clients, s/he "must refer those clients to another interpreter" (Gentile, Ozolins and Vasilakakos 1996: 59-60, emphasis in the original). For instance, "in a medical situation where a woman is the patient, a male interpreter may need to decline the assignment" (*ibid.* : 20).

Additional research stresses the importance of gender-related issues for interpreters rather than the people they assist. Oda and Joyette (2003) describe the particular situation of the Domestic Violence Court System in Ontario, in which interpreters are used to mediating for female victims or witnesses, but experience the need for special training when working with male perpetrators. In this case, gender issues have a great practical impact on the female interpreters' professional and personal lives, and these have to be trained to develop assertiveness and promptly respond to challenges to their physical and psychological safety. Far from advocating the interpreter's neutrality, the authors recommend that a special orientation program be devised that enables interpreters to "understand the pro-feminist philosophy towards violence against women" (Oda and Joyette 2003: 157).

All these works (and those which have not been cited here) appear now as fertile ground for data-driven interdisciplinary research such as Weber, Singy and Guex's, which, as we have seen, is capable of striking a successful compromise between different methods and perspectives, enriching the field of Interpreting Studies and bringing new stimuli into a discipline that otherwise seemed to be indulging in a claustrophobic, stifling closure. In the next section, however, we will see that the situation in Conference Interpreting Studies is not as advanced.

2. Verdini, Agostina (2004). *La resa in interpretazione consecutiva: donne e uomini a confronto*. Unpublished dissertation. Forlì: SSLiMIT, University of Bologna.

Agostina Verdini's dissertation, supervised by Wilma Heinrich and Peter Mead (who has published an abstract of it on the December 2004 issue of Daniel Gile's CIRIN bulletin), is the only piece of research produced in the past two years that explores gender issues in connection with conference interpreting, more specifically, the consecutive mode. The empirical approach is evident: not only does Verdini ground her conclusions in original experimental data, but in her introduction she states that the very choice of the topic was sparked not by theoretical reflection, but by observing the fact that the vast majority of Italian interpreting students and professional interpreters are women (pp. 9, 32 and 34).

Verdini starts by outlining the difference between sex as a biological condition and gender as a social construct, then proceeds to a convincing review of the literature on gender and language/conversation, offering an overview of the dominance approach and the difference approach (1.1). Section 1.2 is devoted to a summary of the existing literature on Neuropsychology and Neurophysiology which investigates sex-specific differences in the brain lateralization of cognitive and linguistic processes. Here Verdini's scientific honesty becomes evident as she gives a plentiful account of works in this field, highlighting the frequent discrepancies between and contradictions in their results, and explicitly admitting that theories which ascribe the divergence between men's and women's cognitive and language processing abilities to different brain morphology have not been demonstrated through reliable evidence as yet (p. 25).

This, however, does not prevent the author from adopting the perspective of Neurophysiology rather than Cultural/Gender Studies in analysing the relationship between interpreting and gender (section 1.3), adapting to interpreting the theories that link empathising skills to female sex and systemizing skills to males (1.4). In particular, she chooses to seek the reasons for the imbalanced proportions of female and male interpreters and interpreting students in the "natural" (i.e., biological and anatomical) diversity of men's and women's brains, which might account for women being more drawn towards, and better equipped for, language-related skills than men (pp. 31-3). Specifically, in this view, interpreting should typically be a women's profession since it allegedly requires an exceptionally high degree of bilateralization of linguistic functions, and reportedly, women show a more symmetric representation of linguistic functions in both hemispheres. Thus, the overwhelming disproportion of female interpreting students might be the result of a sort of "natural selection" of the sex biologically most suited for interpreting tasks (p. 33). This view, incidentally, is also held by another author who is not cited by Verdini, Valeria Darò (1990: 86), with reference to the similar sex distribution of interpreting students at another interpreting school, that of Trieste. A possible objection to Verdini and Darò, however, stems from the consideration of the structure of the interpreting faculties of Forlì and Trieste at the time when the two authors wrote their works. Before the Bologna Process, the actual pre-selection of students was not determined by better

performance at interpreting or interpreting-related activities (as happens now, with a specific entrance exam for the MA in conference interpreting). On the other hand, it coincided with the entrance test that students had to pass two years *before* receiving any specific interpreter training. The entrance test was not geared to interpreting skills, but to translation and generically linguistic abilities. The fact that the majority of students selected by means of such test were mainly female would seem to confirm that women are “naturally” more skilled in language processing in general, provided that women performed better than men at the entrance test, i.e., that a higher proportion of female applicants passed the test compared with the percentage of successes over the total of male applicants. Data concerning the school of Forlì, however, do not seem to confirm this hypothesis: rather, in past years the pass rates were similar for men and women, and the larger proportion of female students was mirrored by the higher percentage of women over the total population of students who took the entrance test, thus suggesting that, rather simply, *there are more female interpreting (and translation) students because women seem to be comparatively more interested than men in studying at an interpreting and translation faculty and therefore in working as interpreters and translators*. [3] Otherwise, quite clearly, more males would apply for interpreting faculties, and probably this would significantly reduce the imbalance between the sexes. Of course, one might interpret this in terms of Neuropsychology and Neurophysiology, but it is clear that shifting the focus from ‘biologically determined skills’ to interest, motivation and personal ambition would require a deeper insight into the social reasons behind the fact that interpreting and other language-related skills are associated with femininity, and therefore more desirable for women rather than men (see for instance Sunderland 2000: 229-30). This not being the case, in Verdini’s dissertation the juxtaposition of Gender Studies and Neurophysiology remains somewhat lacking in coherence, and one is left wondering why what is presented as a result of the differentiation of the female and male brains should be referred to in terms of *gender* rather than *sex* (except perhaps for reasons of “verbal hygiene”, Cameron 1995: 127-8). The treatment of previous literature respectively from Gender Studies and Neurophysiology in two separate sections, without a systematic integration of the two perspectives, contributes to this impression. Two comments, however, must be made here to Verdini’s credit: first, it might be worth repeating that her work is a dissertation, and should it be published as an academic paper (which would surely bring fresh stimuli to Conference Interpreting Studies), it might be partly re-worked; secondly, more important than any criticism is its pioneering potential. If the author cannot be said to have fully struck a really revolutionary compromise between Culture Studies and Neurosciences, at least she sets off on an entirely new and extremely interesting path, which might, if followed further, bring about significant changes in our understanding of the interaction of sociocultural and biological factors in shaping gender identities on one hand, and interpreting skills on the other.

Verdini’s study has other important merits. Although she uses a Neurophysiology approach, she acknowledges all the shortcomings and biases of previous research in that field, cautiously mitigating other authors’ conclusions and transparently highlighting the biases inherent in her own results (esp. sections 1.2, 1.3, and Conclusions). This attitude is in itself evidence of the author’s scientific approach and objectivity: her lack of pretensions, even in the face of the praiseworthy innovations she brings into interpreting studies, are all to her credit, especially considering her student status. Speaking of innovations, the type of experiment she chooses to carry out is interesting in itself. Other authors, more interested in the lateralization of the skills required in simultaneous interpreting, tended to check their theories not against interpreting exercises proper (probably because the resulting data would have been too difficult to analyse and compare), but against simulations involving simpler language processing tasks that could reveal the mechanics of split attention and effort, such as verbal-manual interference paradigms (e.g. tapping while reciting well-known proverbs or prayers, Darò 1990: 86-89). Verdini, on the contrary, does not claim to test hypotheses on brain lateralisation, but rather corroborate existing ones with evidence that male and female students show different interpreting abilities in relation to different types of texts. She does so through consecutive interpreting exercises, thus also contributing to a reorientation of studies on conference interpreting, which are mainly represented by research on the simultaneous mode.

The test, described in chapter 3, consisted in having 28 final-year students (14 males, 14 females) interpret consecutively into Italian two German texts: one economic text, characterised by a high density of figures and field-specific terms, and one non-specific medical text whose main feature was a recognisable rhetorical pattern and the presence of figures of speech. The hypothesis was that male and female students should show different degrees of difficulties in interpreting the two texts, due to differences in specificity, density of information, and idiomatic content of the texts. The parameters used for the assessment of difficulty were both objective (length of the delivery, speech rate, number of pauses, false starts and self-corrections; translation of figures, field-specific terms, names, rhetorical questions, idioms and figures of speech) and subjective (a questionnaire administered to the students who participated in the test, discussed in chapter 4 of the dissertation). The data collected by Verdini seem to prove that male students found the first text comparatively easier than the second, while conversely women performed better than men in the second text. Verdini herself highlights what is perhaps the main limit of her experiment – the numbers being so low that the differences emerging from the two groups might be indicative of individual characteristics rather than general tendencies. Since male students were so few in German final-year interpreting classes, however, a larger sample was not a viable option (p. 214). Moreover, it should be noted that several previous studies on the neurophysiology of language skills employed similarly limited, or even more reduced, samples (Darò 1990: 86-87). Despite two or three slightly confusing details, [4] Verdini’s analysis of results in chapters 3 and 4 is generally clear, and the combination of objective and subjective data provides an interesting double perspective.

Although Verdini’s work seems to be mainly influenced by the theoretical framework provided by authors such as the Italians Gran and Fabbro concerning the different brain lateralization of language processing and speech abilities in men and women (see for instance Gran 1999), in her concluding chapter she resumes a Gender Studies orientation. In particular, the author points out that her gendered presence as a researcher is in itself an inevitable bias against a completely objective stance, which is only a theoretical possibility (p. 216). Moreover, her final remarks on the social implications of the feminisation of the interpreting profession, based on the data provided by another dissertation from the University of Vienna (Zeller 1984), seem to contrast sharply with the widespread resistance to acknowledge that the interpreter’s gender does have a social, cultural, political and ultimately economic significance in the profession (cf. Amato and Mead 2002: 300-1).

3. Conclusions

As already pointed out, gender studies have a varying impact on interpreting studies, depending on the kind of interpreting being investigated – whether community interpreting or conference interpreting.

In studies on community interpreting, gender is recognised as an issue and a variable which can affect communication, the perception of the interpreter by her client, and therefore the interpreter's working conditions and, indirectly, overall performance. This, however, is not seen as a negative factor, as the metaphor of the interpreter as a neutral, inert 'conduit' has been challenged by several authors and – at least in academic discourse – seems to be on the decline, although this might still clash with what is prescribed by professional associations and taught at interpreting schools (Angelelli 2004b: 19-22). Even if specific and exclusive reference to gender issues is still unusual in Community Interpreting Studies, serious empirical work such as that by Angelelli (2003, 2004a, 2004b) and Wadensjö (e.g. 1998) has set a firm ground for a kind of research which goes well beyond the boundary of linguistics meant in the strictest sense, but takes into account the social and cultural context of the interpreting event, and the interpreter's perception of his or her role. The paper by Weber, Singy and Guex is both pioneering (as it addresses directly gender issues) and reassuring, as it is another sign that Community Interpreting Studies are now able and willing to borrow useful methods and notions from Cultural Studies and are already taking the "cultural turn" advocated by Cronin (2002).

Conversely, in Conference Interpreting Studies, the only works that explicitly address gender (or more appropriately, sex) as a diversity factor are those which fall within the boundaries of Neurosciences rather than Gender Studies, with Verdini's notable attempt at reconciling the two positions. Gender Studies are not the only strangers in the realm of interpreting studies; the same can be said of Cultural Studies in general. At present, Diriker 2004 still seems to be the only book that openly rejects the image of conference interpreters "in the ivory tower" and puts simultaneous interpreting back into its socio-cultural context, analysing all aspects of interpreting in a real-life conference, looking not only at the interpreters' performances, but also at their impressions and the perceptions of all other participants, including speakers, the audience, and conference organisers. Diriker has the courage openly to say, based on experimental data, that the simultaneous interpreter's position is " *negotiated* on site amidst a complex and rather fuzzy network of relations, expectations and assessments prevailing in an actual conference context" (Diriker 2004: 137, emphasis in the original). It thus seems that the notion of *situated practices*, echoed by Haraway's (1988) *situated knowledges* and already adapted to interpreting by Angelelli (2004b), can be key to a better understanding of the social dimension of conference interpreting as well as the interpreter's role. For the rest of the literature on conference interpreting, however, the interpreter sadly seems to remain the neutral 'conduit' who must only be concerned with the quality of his or her performance and take care to smooth out all the personal traits (accent, idiolects etc.) that characterise him or her as an individual, but might distract the audience from the mere sense he or she must convey. It is not a case that conference interpreters tend to perceive their roles as less visible than their colleagues working in community settings (Angelelli 2003: 24 and 2004b: 72-3). Nor is it by chance, as Cronin (2002: 396) points out, that one of the most popular interpreting figures ever appeared on the screen is C-3P0, the protocol droid of the *Star Wars* series. In other words, a machine: not only neutral, but also a *neuter*. In this context, Verdini's dissertation appears a groundbreaker, in that it is an acknowledgement of the interpreter's gendered presence. It would now seem time to find out whether the persons on whom the interpreter's professional life and career ultimately depends (clients, conference organisers, end-users) do in fact attach any importance to his or her gender. Experimental data might confirm or refute the need for absolute neutrality in real life, cast a new light on our understanding of what it implies to be a professional and ethical interpreter, and set the ground for a more substantial fusion of Gender Studies and Conference Interpreting Studies.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Patrick Leech, Raffaella Baccolini and Matteo Mazzacurati for their precious help.

References

Alexieva, Bistra (2002). "A Typology of Interpreter-Mediated Events". In Franz Pöchhacker and Miriam Shlesinger (eds.), *The Interpreting Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge. 219-33. (Abridged reprint of a paper published under the same title in 1997, *The Translator* 3(2): 153-74.)

Amato, Amalia and Peter Mead (2002). "Interpreting in the 21 st Century: What Lies Ahead: Summary of the Closing Panel Discussion". In Giuliana Garzone and Maurizio Viezzi (eds.), *Interpreting in the 21 st Century: Challenges and Opportunities*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 295-301.

Angelelli, Claudia (2003). "The Interpersonal Role of the Interpreter in Cross-Cultural Communication. A Survey of Conference, Court and Medical Interpreters in the US, Canada and Mexico". In Louise Brunette, Georges Bastin, Isabelle Hemlin, Heather Clarke (eds.), *The Critical Link 3: Interpreters in the Community*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 15-26.

---- (2004a). *Medical Interpreting and Cross-cultural Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

---- (2004b). *Revisiting the Interpreter's Role. A Study of Conference, Court and Medical Interpreters in Canada, Mexico and the United States*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Berk-Seligson, Susan (2002). "The Impact of Politeness in Witness Testimony: The Influence of the Court Interpreter". In Franz Pöchhacker and Miriam Shlesinger (eds.), *The Interpreting Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge. 279-92. (Abridged reprint of a paper published under the same title in 1988, *Multilingua. Journal of Cross-cultural and Interlanguage Communication* 7(4): 411-39.)

Bowen, Sarah and Joseph M. Kaufert (2003). "Assessing the 'Costs' of Health Interpreter Programs: The Risks and the Promise". In Louise Brunette, Georges Bastin, Isabelle Hemlin, Heather Clarke (eds.), *The Critical Link 3: Interpreters in the*

Community. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 261-72.

Cameron, Deborah (1995). *Verbal Hygiene*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cocchi, Chiara Paola (2005). "Il personale linguistico del Ministero dell'Interno in servizio presso gli uffici periferici: la realtà della Questura di Bologna". In Mariachiara Russo and Gabriele Mack (eds.), *Interpretazione di trattativa*. Milan: Hoepli. 213-30.

Corsellis, Ann (1999). "Training of Public Service Interpreters". In Mabel Erasmus et al. (eds.), *Liaison Interpreting in the Community*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. 197-205.

Crezee, Ineke (2003). "Health Interpreting in New Zealand: The Cultural Divide". In Louise Brunette, Georges Bastin, Isabelle Hemlin, Heather Clarke (eds.), *The Critical Link 3: Interpreters in the Community*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 249-59.

Cronin, Michael (2002). "The Empire Talks Back: Orality, Heteronomy and the Cultural Turn in Interpreting Studies". In Franz Pöchhacker and Miriam Shlesinger (eds.), *The Interpreting Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge. 387-97. (Abridged reprint of a paper published under the same title in 2002, in Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler eds., *Translation and Power*. Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press. 45-62.)

Dallari, Giovanna, Debora Previti and Stefania Ricci (2005). "Interprete o mediatore culturale? Le aspettative di un servizio sanitario italiano". In Mariachiara Russo and Gabriele Mack (eds.), *Interpretazione di trattativa*. Milan: Hoepli. 183-93.

Darò, Valeria (1990). "Speaking Speed during Simultaneous Interpretation. A Discussion of Its Neuropsychological Aspects and Possible Contributions to Teaching". In Laura Gran and Christopher Taylor (eds.), *Aspects of Applied and Experimental Research on Conference Interpretation*. Udine: Campanotto. 83-92.

Delli Ponti, Agata and Karin Forlivesi (2005). "Il lavoro dell'interprete all'interno di una struttura ospedaliera". In Mariachiara Russo and Gabriele Mack (eds.), *Interpretazione di trattativa*. Milan: Hoepli. 195-201.

Detomas, Anna (2002). *Dalla formazione alla professione: inchiesta tra i laureati della Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori dal 1989/90 al 1999/00*. Unpublished dissertation. Forlì: SSLiMIT, University of Bologna.

Diriker, Ebru (2004). *De-/Re-Contextualizing Conference Interpreting: Interpreters in the Ivory Tower?* Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Drennan, Gerard (1999). "Organisational Factors Affecting the Provision of Language Services in Mental Health Care". In Mabel Erasmus et al. (eds.), *Liaison Interpreting in the Community*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. 109-22.

Eighinger, Lynne and Ben Karlin (2003). "The Feminist-Relational Approach: A Social Construct for Event Management". In Louise Brunette, Georges Bastin, Isabelle Hemlin and Heather Clarke (eds.), *The Critical Link 3: Interpreters in the Community*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 37-47.

Garwood, Christopher (2005). "La formazione dell'interprete di trattativa in ambito giudiziario". In Mariachiara Russo and Gabriele Mack (eds.), *Interpretazione di trattativa*. Milan: Hoepli. 145-59.

Gentile, Adolfo, Uldis Ozolins and Mary Vasilakakos (1996). *Liaison Interpreting: A Handbook*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Gran, Laura (1999). "L'interpretazione simultanea: premesse di neurolinguistica". In Caterina Falbo, Mariachiara Russo, Francesco Straniero Sergio (eds.), *Interpretazione simultanea e consecutiva: Problemi teorici e metodologie didattiche*. Milano: Hoepli. 207-27.

Haraway, Donna (1988). "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". *Feminist Studies* 14: 575-99.

Martinsen, Bodil (2002). "Public Service Interpreting: Challenges and How to Meet Them". In Giuliana Garzone, Peter Mead and Maurizio Viezzi (eds.), *Perspectives on Interpreting*. Bologna: CLUEB. 257-67.

McRobbie, Andrea and James Jupp (1993). *Women and Language Services Report – How Can We Tell You ... How Will We Know?* Canberra: Commonwealth-State Council on NESB Women's Issues, AGPS.

Ntshona, Mosula Sheila (1999). "Towards the Development of an Interpreting Model for the Health Sector in South Africa". In Mabel Erasmus et al. (eds.), *Liaison Interpreting in the Community*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. 143-55.

Oda, Melanie and Donna Joyette (2003). "Interpreting for the Perpetrator in the Partner Assault Response Program: The Selection and Training Process". In Louise Brunette, Georges Bastin, Isabelle Hemlin, Heather Clarke (eds.), *The Critical Link 3: Interpreters in the Community*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 147-61.

Pardy, Maree (1995). *Speaking of Speaking: Experiences of Women and Interpreting. Research Report of Interpreting for Women Project*. Melbourne: Clearing House on Migration Issues.

Roy, Cynthia B. (2002). "The Problem with Definitions, Descriptions and the Role Metaphors of Interpreters". In Franz

Pöchhacker and Miriam Shlesinger (eds.), *The Interpreting Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge. 345-53. (Abridged reprint of a paper published under the same title in 1993, *Journal of Interpretation* 6(1): 127-54.)

Rudvin, Mette (2002). "How Neutral is 'Neutral'? Issues in Interaction and Participation in Community Interpreting". In Giuliana Garzone, Peter Mead and Maurizio Viezzi (eds.), *Perspectives on Interpreting*. Bologna: CLUEB. 217-33.

---- (2005). "Genere e mediazione linguistica tra stereotipi, emarginazione professionale e assistenza". In Raffaella Baccolini (ed.), *Le prospettive di genere: discipline soglie confini*. Bologna: Bononia University Press. 85-105.

Sunderland, Jane (2000). "Gender and Language Learning". In Michael Byram (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning*. London and New York: Routledge. 229-32.

Tate, Granville, and Graham H. Turner (2002). "The Code and the Culture: Sign Language Interpreting – In Search of the New Breed's Ethics". In Franz Pöchhacker and Miriam Shlesinger (eds.), *The Interpreting Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge. 373-83. (Reprint of a paper published under the same title in 1997, *Deaf Worlds* 13(3): 27-34.)

Tyolwana, Nonkosi (1999). "An Attempt to Extend Language Awareness in Community Interpreting". In Mabel Erasmus et al. (eds.), *Liaison Interpreting in the Community*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. 215-20.

Ulyatt, Ruth (1999). "The Importance of Discourse Analysis in the Training of Liaison/Community/Public Service Interpreters". In Mabel Erasmus et al. (eds.), *Liaison Interpreting in the Community*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. 250-59.

Wadensjö, Cecilia (2002). "The Double Role of a Dialogue Interpreter". In Franz Pöchhacker and Miriam Shlesinger (eds.), *The Interpreting Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge. 355-70. (Reprint of a paper published under the same title in 1993, *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 1: 105-21.)

---- (1998). *Interpreting as Interaction*. London and New York: Longman.

Zeller, C. M. (1984). *Ursachen und Auswirkungen der Feminisierung im Dolmetsch/Übersetzerstudium und Beruf*. Unpublished master's thesis. Vienna: University of Vienna.

Note

[1] Crezee also ran a pilot survey among health interpreters, showing that a small percentage of respondents did see sex difference between the patient and the interpreter as a cultural barrier to communication; this opinion was more widespread among interpreters of African or Pacific Islands languages (Crezee 2003: 256).

[2] Since it is impossible here to give a full account of the literature arguing for the interpreter's non-neutrality and visibility, I tried to give an account of less-cited works, and am forced to refer the reader to Angelelli 2004b: 16-17, Wadensjö 1998: 279 and Garwood 2005: 154-55 for further indications.

[3] According to calculations based on the official lists collected from the Segreteria Studenti of the University of Bologna at Forlì, of all the candidates who took the entrance tests for years 1989/90-1996/97, 88.71% bore clearly female names, 10.96% clearly male names and 0.33% names that could not be attributed to categories 'male' or 'female'. Among the students who passed the test (*idonei*), 88.95% had clearly female names, 10.59% clearly male names and 0.46% names that could not be attributed to categories 'male' or 'female'. Considering only students whose sex was transparent from their first names, the pass rate was 25.44% for females and 24.51% for males, with a discrepancy of 0.93%, which is hardly statistically relevant.

Not surprisingly, the male/female proportion among candidates at the entrance test is similar to that observed among the graduates of years 1993/94 - 1999/00, who entered the school of Forlì in 1989/90-1996/97 (Detomas 2002: 60) and among whom females were 517 over a total of 581 (88.98%). Interestingly, the percentage of females was slightly higher among translation graduates than interpreting ones (89.68% or 339 over 378, against 87.68% or 178 over 203, Detomas 2002: 50 and 56). This would suggest that, if anything, the preference rate for interpreting (as opposed to translation) was just perceptibly higher among male students than their female colleagues.

[4] Examples are the inversion of the respective lengths of texts 1 and 2 on pp. 50 and 68, or the adoption of different scales in the graphs visualising the length of deliveries on pp. 68-70. Also, two deliveries of text 1 by female students were identified as "outliers" or "rogue variables" because they contained omissions of long chunks of text, and were excluded from the calculation of the average length of delivery (p.72). The average resulting from this exclusion confirmed the author's hypothesis that women found the economic text more difficult, therefore took longer than men to reprocess it. The two deliveries, however, were not excluded from other calculations such as the number of omissions, which therefore resulted to be much higher in the deliveries by female students, thus once again falling in line with the author's hypothesis. The reasons for this choice (if any) should have been argued more carefully in order to prevent readers from perceiving them as tokens of a partisan approach to objective data.