Macro social theory and linguistic ethnography: a bridge (too far)?
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I very much see my work as contributing to a sociolinguistics of globalisation where considerations of the effects of global mobility on local, national and transnational constructions of identity and belonging are increasingly of central concern. A major focus of my work has been to *recognise and theorise the role of translators or interpreters in global processes of communication.*

In my research, I have tried to develop a theoretical language which is capable of comprehending interpreters' embeddedness in social and political processes and capture some of the wider implications of particular modes of interpreter activity.

Interpreters do not come from nowhere. They too are socially and politically situated. In contexts like asylum, they are operating at the grinding edge of macro-political realities.

I would like to talk through - in shorthand - the conceptual framework which begins with a macro-level description of discursive fields and ends, not in micro-analysis, but with an articulation of the social conditions under which both actual and potential forms of discourse may be realised.

My research began as part of a dialogue w/in translation studies on the question of whether translation could be considered a 'field' in Bourdieu's sense and whether within the 'field of translation', in internalising norms of training in which conduit models of language and invisibility dominated, a particular 'translatorial habitus' could be said to have developed by which translators had 'embodied' a distinctive set of values, beliefs and discursive practices that tended toward **subservience** to their client, to the public, to the author, to the text, to language itself, or even, in certain situations of close contact, to the culture or subculture within which the particular translational task was required to make sense. Within these debates, the question was also raised as to whether the 'field' of translation could be regarded as a field in Bourdieu's sense. (By field, I mean a relatively autonomous structure in social space, with its own particular set of values and regulative principles. Fields are understood to correspond to the wider socio-cultural order).

I began to consider these issues with respect to interpreting activity, considering the question of a specific '**interpreting** habitus' and 'field' of interpreting, specifically in relation to the asylum system. Initially, I worked with data derived from a particular immigration court in the US, an asylum system with which I was familiar having worked as a paralegal and interpreter at one point. It was at this point that I began to conceive of interpreting activity not as a field in Bourdieu's sense, but as a site for the re-contextualisation of multiple, well-established fields and their accompanying habitus.

Following Bourdieu, I accepted that the social agents representing their well-established professions (e.g., judges, solicitors, civil servants) would re-produce with some certainty what they felt to be the 'objective' structures of their respective fields - that is that certain assumptions and understandings regarding both the asylum system and interpreters place within it - and that such agents would possess culturally significant forms of capital linked to their respective fields, in this case the legal and political fields, which would confer prestige, status and authority upon them.

Unlike Bourdieu, however whose view is that actions *between* individuals do not constitute the social - the social is perceived as derived from the relational analysis of fields - I wished also to explore the role of interaction within and between fields, taking the view that the development of an 'interpreting habitus' would be contingent upon both macro- **and** micro-orderings of experience. By habitus here I do not mean the emergence of a professional interpreter habitus - I mean the emergence of a kind of 'collective' coming together of divergent habitus that would place interpreters on an equal social footing with all other participants in the social/interactional space.

Set of research questions:

Phase 1

1) How are interpreters positioned within these inter-locking fields given the relatively weak social position of the interpreting profession? Does this relatively weak position make it more likely that others (not interpreters) will define and control interpreting contexts through the imposition of their respective habitus?

2) Can a specific interpreting habitus (set of values, beliefs and discursive practices) emerge from interpreting activity that simultaneously disrupts power relations and (re)structures interpreted events in such a way as to allow all participants to operate with shared understandings and goals regarding interpreting activity?

Phase 2

3) Which or whose normative practices would prevail in the inter-play in social/interactional space across a range of contexts between social agents, field(s) and their accompanying habitus (set of values, beliefs and discursive practices)?

4) How are interpreters positioned vis-à-vis their social and biological trajectories (their initial/acquired habitus) within the social/interactional space of interpreting activity?

Ongoing

5) What, if any, relationship can be established between (1-3) and the achievement of just outcomes for asylum seekers?

6) To what extent can 'shared understandings and goals' regarding interpreting activity be seen as significant to the achievement of just outcomes?

Methods - Phase 1 and Phase 2

The empirical investigation of this question took the following form:
- interviews with key informants to elicit their views on the interpreter role
- observation (w/accompanying field notes) of key site for the convergence of participants (Immigration Appeals Hearings)
- observation of interpreter training sessions
- survey questionnaire of interpreters (designed to explore interpreters' sense of belonging in relation to the UK and/or an ethnic minority community/communities
- range of documentary evidence (legal, political and educational fields)

Within the asylum system, the dominant discursive practices of the relevant fields reveal how notions linked to processes of globalisation like 'transnational', deterritoriality and the 'politics of belonging' are constructed and configured within global power relations.

I will give a brief account of what I see as the dominant practices within each field.

Within the **political field**, nationhood, not universal personhood, remains the reference point for claimants' rights of entry, significantly limiting the conditions for the emergence of a discourse of 'transnational belonging' or moral cosmopolitanism. In interpreted asylum events, the force of linguistic utterances - for both claimants and the state - remains located firmly in the context of national cultures and identities. Although migration is acknowledged to be an inevitable consequence of the establishment of global economic networks, it is frequently portrayed by the government and perceived by members of the public as a potential threat to the internal economic or cultural order and stability of the nation, creating divisions between members of the same society. The national media frequently portray social and economic conflicts as primarily an outcome of tensions between citizens/insiders and migrants/outsiders, divisions amongst different types of migrant groups can be equally corrosive to an individual's or a group's sense of belonging.

In the **legal field**, such divisions originate in and become perpetuated by immigration policies and practices. With the implementation in recent decades of far stricter interpretations of the 1951 Geneva Convention's criteria for what constitutes a refugee, most asylum seekers fail to obtain formal refugee status. Even where temporary refugee status without any legal commitment to extend this to permanent residence is granted or applicants are held in reception/detention centres during the application process, nation states visibly mark asylum seekers as outsiders whatever the eventual outcome of their claim. Cutbacks to legal services have forced many of the best practitioners to stop doing asylum cases as the legal aid money they receive is not enough to adequately represent

people's claims (also has significant implications for the interpreter role). Whatever the historical precedents, the motivations for current migration to and between countries have tended to be falsely portrayed in either economic or political terms. The persistence of this either/or interpretation of the causes of migration is evident in the pejorative categorisation of the 'bogus' asylum seeker in cases where an asylum claim is believed to be based on 'economic' rather than political reasons.

In the **educational field**, the available models of interpreting do not adequately address or prepare newly-trained interpreters for the complexities of real interpreting contexts or expectations of users. Despite established codes of practice and an increased awareness of the interpreter role, there is still much uncertainty and inconsistency amongst all participants in the political asylum adjudication system - adjudicators, solicitors, interpreters, Home Office representatives and claimants alike - regarding the exact nature of this role in interpreted encounters. Approaches to training clearly contribute to these uncertainties.

Taken together, the political and legal fields - in the specific ways they represent national interests and construct asylum seekers - both inform and maintain the legitimation of blatant exclusionary policies with regard to asylum seekers. The contradictions within the educational field with respect to norms and expectations contribute to the fact that interpreting activity remains contingent upon the conditions of its recontextualisation in relation to other fields and their social agents. It is not, however, inevitable that the interpreter's role will be subservient to others. Alternative models do exist that encourage interpreters to assert their specialised knowledge and understandings within interpreted events, and in the process, affect a shift in power relations favorable to their position within certain local interactional context.

The discursive formations evident in each of these fields are arbitrary - they are socially and historically contingent - and as far removed from the positive connotations of abstract notions like globalisation, deterritoriality and transnationalism as is possible. On the contrary, these fields converge on the asylum application process strongly oriented to principles of exclusion, the maintenance of the nation state and of closed borders.

Despite the rather bleak picture of the possibilities of transnationalism and moral universalism in coutnries like the UK that this suggests, however, across the arc of activity of the asylum process, I have identified a clear tension between discursive practices that are oriented toward **mutual understanding**, what I have marked on the handout as "democratic iterations" (borrowing from the political philosopher, Seyla Benhabib who borrows from Derrida the notion of iteration) and those "authorised discourses" (Bourdieu) in which **pre-established power relations** are maintained. And despite their relatively weak social positioning, interpreters are crucial in helping to sustain or contest this tension in their place within the 'politics of belonging' that informs immigration policies and practice.

Briefly, the notion of 'iteration' suggests the state of indeterminacy of meaning, the view that in the repetition of a linguistic utterance the 'performative force' of the utterance breaks from prior established contexts of socially established meanings. Thus, diverse linguistic, cultural or religious practices, for example, can and must be taken up in a political context of debate that does not require shared meaning as a precondition.

This notion is I believe similar to, for example, Bernstein's distinction between voice and message - where message is the source for a 'yet-to-be-voiced' or Charles Taylor's notion of the 'phronetic gap' between a rule and its enactment. It is this discursive gap that Bernstein has suggested is 'the meeting point of order and disorder, of coherence and incoherence'.

The notion of a democratic iteration suggests the possibility of meaning - and thus social knowledge - that is not weighed down or over determined by prior context or position holders. It suggests that the capacity of the force of an utterance to assume new contexts - which Derrida suggests emanates in language itself - creates the necessary conditions for the emancipatory potential of partners in cross-cultural contexts of communication to create new meanings which themselves remain unfixed to any one context.

Authorised discourse, on the other hand, reflects Bourdieu's view that the efficacy of speech derives not from language but from the institutional conditions of its production and reception. For Bourdieu, language cannot perform a break with context - the power of language cannot be invoked linguistically, authority comes to language from the outside, hence the impossibility of 'discursive gaps' that might challenge the socially pre-established grounds of legitimate meanings.

In my research, interpreters, as active agents in social/interactional space, contribute both consciously and unconsciously to the interplay or tension between the force of democratic iteration and that of authorised language as they help to negotiate linguistic and cultural meanings between the established and excluded inhabitants of a nation-state.

The 'communication rights' **granted to or withheld** from interpreters as well as those **claimed and enacted by interpreters themselves** personifies this tension. The extent to which interpreters claim 'communication rights' and the type of rights they will claim will depend on the interplay between social and interactional space across the arc of activity that constitutes the asylum process. It is here where actual discourse (text) and potential discourse meet. It is my view that what happens at the surface level of interactional activity in interpreting contexts (what micro-analysis captures as the **text**)
is more often than not a micro drama through which a larger social and political reality is acted out in a refracted form. My research has attempted to articulate more fully what that larger social and political reality is.

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