Non-professional translators and interpreters

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Non-professional Translators and Interpreters

Non-professional Interpreters and Translators are bi/multilingual speakers who interpret and/or translate in a variety of formal and informal contexts and settings, who have received little or no formal education or training in translation or interpreting, and are often not remunerated for their work.

Translation and interpreting are ancient practices, probably two of the oldest human activities. Ever since the need to overcome language barriers emerged, communities and peoples have had the need to rely on the skills of individuals able to speak two or more languages. Hence, throughout history the role they played contributed to facilitating cultural, economic and religious communication and contact. In the past seventy years, the onset and growth of

globalization, mobility of people, trade, armed conflicts, and the IT revolution have triggered an exponential rise in the demand for linguistic mediation services in all areas of public and private life. The mismatch between this demand and the reality of the often insufficient provision of linguistic mediation services has resulted in the increase of the use of non-professionals in almost all the domains where professionals would normally be employed.

1. Definitions

The study of NPIT stemmed in the 1970s from the notion of the 'natural translator'*, a theory that conceptualized the ability to translate and interpret as a quasi-universal natural aptitude. According to this hypothesis natural translators mediate "(i) culturally

(i.e. in all cultures); (ii) linguistically (in all languages and all registers); (iii) historically (throughout history); or (iv) ontogenetically and linguo-developmentally (from the moment that an individual starts to acquire a second language)" (Harris and Sherwood 1978: 155).

One of the main extensions of the Natural Translator Hypothesis is Harris' (2017) attempt to reconcile Toury's notion of the native translator with the initial concept of the natural translator. Harris conceptualizes a continuum from natural to (beginner and then advanced) native translator to expert/professional translators that offers a more nuanced categorization of the different levels that a bilingual speaker may reach according to the kind of (acquired) competence and expertise they have gained.

Drawing from Harris' concept of the natural translator, Whyatt (2017) applies a cognitive developmental perspective to the innate ability to translate of bilinguals based on a continuum ranging from a natural predisposition to translate to untrained ability, trained skill, competence and expertise as the final stage.

Criticisms to the natural translation hypothesis challenged the premise that bilingualism is a precondition for the development of translation competence arguing that this depends on other factors, namely fluency, motivation, specific and specialized knowledge, strategies and techniques used to translate (see Bilingualism and Translation*).

The term NPIT has recently gained wider currency and is rapidly surpassing other labels that are used to define this practice and that include, inter alia, ad hoc interpreting, family interpreting, informal

interpreting, lay interpreting and translation. Even though, in previous decades, NPIT had been used to describe interpreting and translation practices performed by non-professional (see for instance Knapp-Potthoff and Knapp 1986; Lörscher 1991), it is only recently that this area of TIS has commanded the attention and scrutiny of academia and the public sphere alike. This represents a significant departure from an academic- or professionally-oriented research agenda informed by "institutionalized forms of interpreting practice and learning" (Boeri 2012:117) which often problematizes the notion of NPIT and its existence by representing it as non-normative, damaging and antithetical to professional practice, norms and skills (see also Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012, Ozolins 2014). Indeed, the characterization of non-professional interpreters and translators generally relies on the juxtaposition with

and, by default, the non-compliance to the criteria that are used to denote professionals, according to which "a professional is *recruited* to do a specific job, for which s/he will be *paid* and which s/he will do complying with a specific set of rules, i.e. with a *code of ethics and standards of practice*. Her/his professional status will also normally involve *social prestig*e" (emphasis in the original, Antonini et al. 2017:7). As pointed out also in other analyses of NPIT (e.g. Pérez-González e Susam-Saraeva 2012, Ozolins 2014) these demarcation lines between professionals and non-professionals are blurry and slippery. Moreover, labelling NPIT as the dark side of its professional counterpart is no longer adequate to define and describe a complex and distinct phenomenon that is emerging as an area of study in its own right.

2.   Domains of NPIT

Pérez-González e Susam-Saraeva's (2012) provide a comprehensive analysis of the *raison d'être* of NPIT, which encompass geopolitical, socio-economic and/or socio-professional reasons (Boeri 2012), as well as undeveloped language services and/or negative or hostile institutional attitudes that create a situation in which "non-speakers of the majority language must provide their own solutions to communication" (Ozolins 2014:32).

In terms of impact, visibility and research NPIT is still a submersed phenomenon. While there are no data on the amount of non-professional activities that are carried out nor any available estimates on its economic value, on the basis of extant literature and resources it can be safely assumed that

professional and non-professional mediation practices (for all modes and types of interpreting and translation) coexist in all those domains where language services are needed.

NPIT is practiced in sectors that include, but are not restricted to business, community, public and community services, conflict/war and crisis management, the judicial/legal sector, media, religion, sports, tourism. In these domains, NPIT is either performed at an individual level, as an alternative option to professional interpreting and translation or as a form of unrecognized translation,[1] or through collective efforts as is the case with

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[1] Brian Harris uses unrecognized translation in one of the posts in his blog Unprofessional Translation (3 March 2010). This term denotes those NPIT practices that occur within the practice of other jobs such as, for instance, journalism or academia. This blog is to date one of the main resources for information on Natural Translation, Native Translation and Language Brokering, with posts and threads that provide a current perspective on initiatives, events, and trends in the world of NPIT.

crowdsourcing and volunteer interpreting/translation (see Collaborative translation*).

What is also worth noting is that for all the domains listed above and which are described below there is great potential for broader research efforts.

2.1 Non-professional interpreters and translators in the media

The role and activities of non-professional interpreters and translators in the media has been the focus of a growing body of studies. Research has focussed on the occurrence of NPIT in terms of modes of interpreting/translation, genre (fictional, non-fictional, reality shows, etc.), type (live or recorded events and programmes), broadcast medium (cinema, television, radio) (Antonini and Bucaria 2015). NPIT in the media may take the form of,

among others, community translation (the translation by non-professionals of software or websites also referred to as collaborative translation, crowdsourcing, and user-based translation); fan dubbing and subbing (fan-made dubbing and subtitling of films, TV and web programmes and series); fun dubbing and subbing (dubbing and subtitling created with humorous purposes); videogame localization (gamer-made localization of computer and smart device videogames); scanlation (the scanning, translation, and editing of comics by fans); media interpreting/translation (non-professionals who interpret/translate in entertainment, journalism, sports).

2.2 Non-professional interpreters and translators in community and public services

The community and public services domain is where non-professionals (adults and children alike) are extensively and increasingly involved as interpreters and/or translators. In many countries, the emergence of super diverse linguistic landscapes has not been met with an adequate provision of language services to allow foreigners and immigrants to access public and community services and interact with mainstream institutions of the host country. Whenever professional services are either not available or provided, these people will rely on the help of family members (adults but also children), friends, or members of their ethnic/linguistic community to mediate linguistically and culturally for them. In this specific domain, non-professionals are likely to act prevalently as liaison and community interpreters in formal settings such as education, health, public offices, police, prison, but also

informally in a huge range of situations (see for instance Baraldi and Gavioli 2012, Schouten 2012).

2.3 Non-professional interpreters and translators in conflict and war

The study of the work of non-professional interpreters and translators in conflict and war as well as crisis and disaster management is quite recent and has thus yielded a scattering of publications. Research on NPIT in conflict and war has focussed mainly on the role played by civilians involved as interpreters during past and present conflict situations in aiding foreign armies in communicating with local populations (Ruiz Rosendo and Barea Muñoz 2017). Studies on NPIT in crisis and disaster management (also labelled humanitarian translation) have looked at the involvement of volunteer/activist interpreters

and translators networks in providing urgent language services (Federici and O'Brien 2019).

2.4 Child language brokering

Language and cultural mediation activities performed by children and adolescents fall under the rubric of Child Language Brokering (CLB). CLB refers to the linguistic and cultural mediation activities performed by bilingual children who in formal and informal contexts and domains mediate for their family, friends as well as members of the linguistic community to which they belong. Though generally associated with the children of immigrant groups, in reality it takes place within all linguistic minority groups (including, for instance, signing communities and heritage linguistic minorities), that is in all those situations in which people who do not

share the same language and culture come into contact and need to communicate. Within NPIT studies, this area of research is perhaps the most developed and multidisciplinary. Research on CLB gained momentum in the 1990s and over the past three decades it has contributed to give visibility to this phenomenon to the research world, but also and foremost, to educators, social service providers and policy makers. The study of CLB can be subsumed into specific thematic areas that have developed over the past five decades that focus specifically on the outcomes of CLB practices rather than the setting of the domain in which it takes place: i) CLB and academic performance; ii) cognitive and sociolinguistic outcomes of CLB; iii) CLB and parent-child relationship; iv) psychological outcomes of CLB; v) CLB and language racialization and

socialization in immigrant communities (Antonini 2019).

There are several interesting and emerging avenues of research that would benefit from increased investigation. They are related to the role played by non-professional interpreters and translators in religious contexts (e.g. church interpreting and religious translation), in the judicial/legal sector, sign language interpreting (as performed by both adults and children of deaf adults - Codas), business and tourism (Baraldi and Gavioli 2012).

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