Bridging Divides in the Interpreting Profession: Response to Gile and Napier (2020)

Hilde Fiva Buzungu[1]

Oslo Metropolitan University, Faculty of Social Sciences

Jessica P. B. Hansen[2]

University of Oslo, Center for Multilingualism in Society across the Lifespan

Abstract

This commentary continues the discussion raised by Daniel Gile and Jemina Napier (2020) and aims to examine further the interconnectedness of signed and spoken language interpreting. Whereas Gile and Napier have drawn attention to some dimensions of complexity, we suggest that there are more to be explored. Focusing on the situated nature of interpreting, and including a broader range of practices of spoken language interpreting, we argue that complexities in interpreting are not inherently more present in signed language interpreting than in spoken language interpreting, and that there are situated and local contexts that must be taken more fully into account. As interpreters of signed (Hansen) and spoken (Buzungu) languages, we eagerly anticipate the rapidly approaching unification of the interpreting profession and the academic communities.

Keywords: spoken language interpreting, signed language interpreting, interpreting profession, professional development, complexity in interpreting

[1] *Correspondence to: Hilde Fiva Buzungu, hilde.buzungu@oslomet.no*
[2] *Correspondence to: Jessica P. B. Hansen, j.p.b.hansen@iln.uio.no*

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1.   Introduction

In the latest volume of this journal, Daniel Gile and Jemina Napier (2020) present their reflections on the interconnectedness of spoken and signed language interpreting. In their comparison between spoken and signed language interpreting, Gile and Napier differentiate spoken language interpreting according to settings, distinguishing between conference and community interpreting. We suggest that including a broader range of practices of spoken language interpreting and considering the situated nature of interpreting will contribute to furthering the discussion. In the conclusion of their article, the authors write, "There is clearly much common ground between spoken language interpreting and SLI, especially as regards community interpreting, and the differences make mutual neighborly interest productive" (p. 68). We agree fully with their conclusion, and the topic is a pertinent one for the interpreting studies academic community as well as for practitioners of interpreting. In this commentary, we build on Napier and Gile's work and further explore some of the topics they address.

2.   Complexity in interpreting

Gile and Napier write that "[signed language interpreting] is more complex than spoken language interpreting" (2020, p. 68). *Communicative complexity* is a notion that intuitively seems appropriate in discussions of language-discordant interpreter-mediated interaction. *Complexity* as a concept is often used in a sense that can overlap with 'difficult.' However, the notion of complexity goes beyond this, because it encompasses a greater number of relationships mutually influencing each other (Hylland Eriksen, 2007). In this sense, complexity signifies multiple dimensions and intersections of these, as well as a level of unpredictability in how the various elements interact. As Hylland Eriksen puts it, this entails that "complexity is [when something is] not only many times greater than supposed in simple causal accounts, it is of a different order" (2007, p. 1059). There are several possible dimensions along which to consider complexity in interpreting, one of these is linguistic complexity. In assessing the linguistically complexity of a particular communicative interaction, Juola (2008) emphasizes the extent of the shared knowledge among the participants. The less "common knowledge" there is between participants in communicative interactions, the greater the complexity. Both Juola (2008) and Scollon and Scollon (1995) link this to the degree of language concordance, in the sense that people with a shared language commonly have more shared knowledge than those who do not share a language. Therefore, language discordance in itself can be seen as a factor adding to the complexity of a communicative interaction.

   Elaborating on the statement above, Gile and Napier link the complexity of signed language interpreting to several issues. First, they mention that minority language speakers may say something to a signed language interpreter while she is interpreting into the signed language. This also frequently occurs when interpreting in spoken languages, particularly during simultaneous interpreting without an interpreting booth, when the interpreter is interpreting in a soft voice while seated close to the minority language speaker in a meeting with several

participants. Second, they link the complexity to the fact that signed language interpreters must "mind their spatial position so as to see what they need to see and be seen at the same time" (Gile & Napier, 2020, p. 68). The inherent visuality of signed languages clearly distinguishes them from spoken languages; however, spoken language interaction is by no means strictly verbal. Direction of gaze and gestures can carry integral meaning in spoken language utterances. For instance, the multimodal organization of spoken language interaction is emphasized in video-mediated interpreting, where the participants, both interpreters and other participants, rely on embodied resources in the interaction, although they may not create an interactional space giving the participants visual access to each other (Hansen, forthcoming). Third, on the topic of complexity Gile and Napier mention that signed language interpreters "need to deal with highly variable signing styles and to adapt to deaf clients who may not have good mastery of their standard national sign language" (p. 68). However, the issue of variable language proficiency and language varieties and accents used in the interpreter-mediated interaction is also prevalent in spoken language interpreting, both in public sector settings (Buzungu, forthcoming) and conference settings (Gile, 2009). Moreover, in simultaneous interpreting between two spoken languages without an interpreting booth (so-called chuchotage interpreting) the fact that both input and output are auditive into the same room makes this a complex practice for both interpreters and primary participants in the encounter. Finally, in public sector interpreting in spoken languages, interpreters are still frequently working alone, as opposed to in conference interpreting and signed language interpreting, where two interpreters may be seen as the norm. Working alone adds to the complexity of the interpreting task, because the interpreter must simultaneously interpret and carry out any situational management needed. Thus, complexity when it comes to interpreting may occur along a range of dimensions, such as setting, content, participation framework, technological mediation, and physical conditions, not to mention interpreters' linguistic competencies, experience, and prior knowledge. Based on our understanding of complexity, we would suggest that most interpreted encounters are marked by complexity along several dimensions, and that this complexity is not more inherently prevalent when the interpreter-mediated encounter includes a signed language than when it does not.

3.   Size of lexicon in spoken and signed languages

Gile and Napier suggest that a fundamental difference between spoken and signed language interpreting is the size of the standardized lexicon available to interpreters, in the sense that "the lexicons of spoken languages are larger by at least one order of magnitude than the lexicons of signed languages" (2020, p. 64). Although this is often the case, what is urgent to an interpreter is not necessarily the size of the lexicon of a language per se, but rather the question of standardized lexicon available on the specific topic that is being dealt with in that particular interpreter-mediated encounter. For example, when interpreting a meeting between a social worker and a service user in Norway, the interpreter working in Norwegian and Norwegian Sign Language may have more standardized lexicon available to her in both her working languages than the interpreter interpreting between Norwegian and Kirundi or Burmese, because Norwegian social welfare benefits terminology is generally not standardized in these and many other languages. Similarly, when an interpreting student working with Norwegian and Sámi is asked to interpret in a role play of an asylum interview during her interpreting studies, this will offer her substantial terminology challenges, as Sámi language is rarely used in this context and standardized lexicon is thus not as available to her as it is to her colleague interpreting between Norwegian and English in the same role play. Among the factors contributing to the size of the lexicon in a language on a given topic—including available terminology resources and whether the language exists in written form, is a language used in education, or is a state-bearing language of administration—its modality (signed or spoken) is not a primary factor. Thus, interpreters in spoken languages of limited diffusion may be just as skilled as signed language interpreters at coping with challenges brought about by limitations to the standardized lexicon in the topic of the encounter in either or both of their working languages.

4.   One interpreting profession

On the historical developments of the interpreting profession, Gile and Napier distinguish between spoken language conference interpreting, spoken language community interpreting, and signed language interpreting (2020, p. 63). However, is it really that simple? Can we separate the interpreting profession into these three neat categories? In the Norwegian context, for example, interpreting in the indigenous Sámi languages has developed to a large extent in isolation from other languages. Moreover, conference interpreting is a relatively marginal segment in Norway, limited to a few handfuls of interpreters in some major European languages. Still, conferences are held in other languages, and interpreters who may ordinarily take assignments in community interpreting carry out interpreting in these settings, similar to the signed language interpreters who interpret in both settings. As for issues of professional status, it is not clear-cut in the Norwegian context whether signed or spoken language interpreters have the highest status. Remuneration is generally higher in spoken language interpreting in Norway, both in the public sector and in the conference market, whereas signed language interpreting is more strictly regulated when it comes to a monopoly of practice for those with formal qualifications (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2014). In Norway, bachelor's programs have been established for the study of both spoken and signed language interpreting (OsloMet, 2020a, 2020b). A major difference in the current education of interpreters in Norway is that a bilingual proficiency test is required for admission into the spoken language interpreting program. Future signed language interpreters, however, are expected to start from scratch and develop full professional proficiency in Norwegian Sign Language, in addition to learning how to interpret, within their 3-year BA training. Whereas the bachelor's program for spoken language interpreting covers topics such as interpreting in public services (community interpreting), interpreting in complex meetings, and simultaneous interpreting, the signed language interpreting program includes topics such as interpreting for the deaf and blind, and speech-to text-interpreting. Therefore, spoken language interpreters complete their education with more specific training on public sector interpreting than do signed language interpreters in Norway.

5.   Towards a situatedness orientation in Interpreting Studies

Interpreting is a situated practice carried out in a wide range of settings where numerous factors may affect the complexity of the work being carried out by the interpreter, such as the institutional frame, the communicative setting, the language combinations and language varieties involved, and the physical setting. Rather than siloing our profession into different categories, such as "signed language interpreting," "spoken language community interpreting," and "spoken language conference interpreting," we might be better served by recognizing interpreting as a practice that occurs in a diversity of language combinations and a diversity of settings.

Interpreting may be carried out between two spoken languages, a spoken and a signed language, two signed languages, a spoken and a written language, a signed and a written language, and so on. The languages involved may be closely related, such as Norwegian and Swedish, or they may be less closely related, such as spoken Arabic and Norwegian Sign Language, or spoken English and written Tigrinya. In cases where the languages are less closely related linguistically, this offers substantial challenges to interpreters. Moreover, working with languages that have less standardized lexicons in the domain the meeting is about may cause complications depending on the prior knowledge and common knowledge of the participants, including the interpreter.

Interpreting may be carried out in conferences, in public service provision, or in other settings such as international business (Gentile, Ozolins, & Vasilakakos, 1996), media (Englund Dimitrova, 2019), and research (Borchgrevink, 2003). Moreover, even though some languages may be more prevalent in some settings, such as English and French in international conferences, Tigrinya in asylum interviews, and Norwegian Sign Language in press conferences on Norwegian TV, there is no innate link between setting and language. When we silo "spoken language conference interpreting," we may contribute to a view of signed languages as languages not meant for the international conference arena. In reality, most languages can be found in most settings: Conferences may require interpreting between Norwegian and Nuer, courts may require interpreting between English and Norwegian Sign Language, and orthopedic hospital wards may require interpreting between Norwegian and German.

6. Conclusions

Gile and Napier's (2020) commentary article provides an interesting and highly relevant discussion on the interconnectedness of signed and spoken language interpreting. They have opened an enriching discussion that will benefit both the academic community and the community of practitioners. As interpreters of signed (Hansen) and spoken (Buzungu) languages, we eagerly anticipate the rapidly approaching unification of the interpreting profession and the academic communities. Although Gile and Napier have drawn attention to some dimensions of complexity, we suggest that there are more to be explored, particularly given the situated nature of interpreting. Internationally, the interpreting profession has not developed uniformly. Not all countries have much conference interpreting; some countries have indigenous peoples and languages with specific language policies that have shaped the profession; and the flows of migration vary enormously. Therefore, the educational programs, qualification schemes, and professional status of interpreters are also situated by nature, developing within local contexts. In exploring the interconnectedness of signed and spoken language interpreting, these local contexts can enrich the discussions.

As Uldis Ozolins (2014) points out in his excellent article on how those in the field talk about interpreting as a practice and profession, the interpreting profession has historically been plagued by adjectival divides ("court interpreting," "community interpreting," "ad hoc interpreting," "liaison interpreting," "sign language interpreting," etc.), which have contributed to the fragmenting of the discipline. Only by radically changing our path from such divisiveness can we aspire for a more unified profession in the future. There is a risk of marginalizing certain language combinations or settings, while centering others. However, if we are able to avoid that predicament, we may aspire to a nuanced and situated understanding of the interpreting profession and the complexity of interpreting practice. As Jemina Napier points out:

> If you ask any spoken or signed language interpreter for their definition of interpreting, it is likely they will give you the same answer. The goal for any interpreter is to ensure that two or more people who do not use the same language come to understand the same message. (2015, p. 132)

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