

## **Investigating intersubjectivity as a discursive accomplishment in relation to interpreter mediation: building a conceptual and analytical framework**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the problem of intersubjective understanding in interpreter mediation as an emergent process in order to illuminate the gaps and slippages that occur at the interface where different professions meet in providing service delivery to service users with a limited linguistic capacity for dealing with complex institutional contexts. Building on a small study of interpreter and service provider perceptions of the occupational other (Tipton 2012), the article considers a range of sites where intersubjective understanding can be discursively accomplished (e.g. service encounters and research interviews) and the conceptual and methodological implications of such sites for evaluating reflexive orientations to other at the level of service delivery.

### **Investigating intersubjectivity as a discursive accomplishment in relation to interpreter mediation: building a conceptual and analytical framework**

Research into Public Service Interpreting is a relatively new but growing sub-field within Translation and Interpreting Studies. It has emerged as a result of the complex social needs presented by migrant flows, particularly towards countries in the West in recent decades, and the need to assess institutional responses to the social and legal imperatives such flows generate. Analyses of interaction in the triadic constellation of

interpreter, service user, and primary service provider, and the relationship between this micro level of interaction and wider institutional and social life, continue to illuminate the thorny issues involved in service delivery to vulnerable groups such as equality of access, quality of service, institutional power relations and, more generally, human communication in a highly mediated form.

At a broad level, this work is concerned with the potential for this form of mediated interaction to shed light on the ways in which individuals adjust to change in human services contexts and issues of ‘other-orientedness’ in human-to-human communication. Inasmuch as interpreter mediation purports to serve a positive communicative function and appears as an unproblematic mechanism of intercultural communication, it generates disruption and a form of ‘cognitive dissonance’ in the workplace that service providers are often left to manage without a coherent framework for doing so.

In human services contexts where multiagency approaches to service delivery have become established practice (cf. Easen *et al.* 2000 for a discussion of the British context), service providers such as nurses, social workers, and police officers are increasingly called upon to reflexively manage their practice at the local level and navigate their way through the challenges to professional territory presented by the incoming ‘occupational other’. Although interpreter mediation presents a substantively different range of issues, service providers nevertheless need to develop skills that allow them to consciously *attend to* the disruption and dissonance these issues entail. Ascertaining the nature of these skills and the ways in which they may be developed is a longer-term goal of research in this area that seeks explicit grounding in ‘an ethics of practical relevance’ (following Sarangi and Roberts 1999: 2); that is, research *with* service providers that can lead to enhanced practice and understanding.

The focus of this article is on perceptions of the professional interculture formed each time the triadic constellation is generated, and the practical and theoretical complexities these perceptions pose for investigating intersubjective understanding as a ‘discursive accomplishment’. Intersubjective understanding is viewed as an emergent process that takes account of more than an individual’s ability to monitor self and other during interaction, and encompasses wider understandings of institutional and professional roles, discourses and values that may or may not be discursively revealed *in situ*. As such, it can be considered from the perspective of mutual understanding obtained between occupational groups at the macro level, and between individual representatives of occupational groups at the micro level of interaction, although the risk of over-essentialising occupational groups is acknowledged.

The multilevel perspective set out above presents particular methodological challenges for the researcher in terms of locating the sites where intersubjective understanding emerges and the type of approach best suited to its analysis. In this article, the notion of ‘discursive accomplishment’ is widened to incorporate notions of ‘discursive construction’ as a means to illuminate intersubjectivity as a process that occurs both inside and outside of the interactive process. It draws on other work (Tipton 2012) in which sites of interaction such as research interviews, are used to explore *perceptual frames* constructed by interpreters and primary service providers and their potential influence on the interculture generated as their two worlds interpenetrate.

This article develops the insights gained through research interviews about macro level perceptions, by considering the difficulties in incorporating such insights into micro level analysis of talk *in situ*. One such difficulty concerns the problem of ‘voice’ in interpreter-mediated interaction. Finally, the article explores the use of conversation analytical methods in the analysis of intersubjectivity-as-process, drawing on studies

involving monolingual service encounters as a means of contrast with interpreter-mediated encounters.

### **Perceptual frames: insights and methodological limitations**

In the field of Interpreting Studies, research on perception has long been employed as a method of triangulation to explore the gaps between what interpreters say they do and what they actually do in practice (e.g. Anderson 1976; Angelelli 2004). In the investigation of wider workplace phenomena, this type of data also allows insight into the loose macro level structures that impact, although not determine, interpreter-mediated encounters and that are generated through the values, attitudes, knowledge and power bases held by individuals, but that are not necessarily directly observable in situated interaction. The truth claims that inhere in such accounts of perception, however, need to be treated with caution in terms of their explanatory power, which is why they are considered as part of a wider analytical process.

The discursive accomplishment of intersubjective understanding presupposes that the inner intentions and motivations of interactants can somehow be made available through talk. Notwithstanding the philosophical and psychological issues this raises about the relationship between language and knowledge, in interpreter mediation the problem takes on a very practical form due to the nature of communication. This is brought into relief when contrasted with discourse exchanges that do not involve interpreter mediation. For instance, as Gumperz (1999: 455) observes in relation to in-depth discourse analyses of situated performances '[m]ore often than not participants' definition of what the relevant event is and what it means in an encounter emerges in and through the performance itself'. In interpreter-mediated encounters, there is very limited scope for interpreters and primary service providers to verbalise and negotiate a shared definition of the 'relevant event' and its related subcomponents in interaction with a minority speaking service

user; in fact, shared definitions of the relevant event have to be assumed to a large extent, otherwise communication would collapse.

While such assumptions may not materially affect the outcome of the encounter, it nevertheless suggests that a weaker level of intersubjective understanding between the interpreter and primary service provider is generated than might otherwise be obtained. Furthermore, although the interpreter arguably is unconcerned with defining the 'relevant event' (i.e. service user needs), since this lies within the realm of the primary service provider as the knowledgeable expert in the domain (cf. Corsellis 2008), he or she is nevertheless called upon to *reflect* the primary service provider's definition of the relevant event. This process depends on a considerable convergence of sense-making (contextualisation) processes and a deeper level of intersubjective understanding than is perhaps assumed.

An analytical focus on perceptions of the occupational other that develop beyond (i.e. prior and subsequent to) interaction allows some account to be taken of the individual's sociocultural and sociohistorical positioning vis-à-vis the occupational other. This is because the processes of perception-making and perception-giving permit the articulation of connections, understandings, influences and assumptions about the professional self and significant workplace others (colleagues and service users) in ways that are not publicly available in face-to-face interpreter-mediated interaction. Perhaps more importantly, they allow for perceptions to be articulated in the context of a particular time-space continuum: the here-and-now and recent or distant past, but also in ways that reflect changes over time. It is posited that for an individual to consciously enhance intersubjective understanding, taking account of the self (and other) as a socioculturally and sociohistorically-situated being is warranted.

In practical terms, this might entail conscious reflection on prior training and experience in order to evaluate current competence in the soft

skills of relationship management and the impact of others in shaping orientation to workplace practices *at a particular point in time*. In the sociological literature, the notion of different timescales of sociocultural and institutional routines is conceptualised, for example, as *longue durée* as Linell (2009: 54) observes, drawing on the term used by Giddens (1984: 35). The notion is usefully illustrated by reference to shifts in social work practice and training which have led practitioners to focus more on the informational than the social aspects of service delivery (Parton 2008). In interpreter mediation, these shifts have potential implications intra-institutionally, since social work practitioners, whose training was informed with a focus on rapport-building as opposed to policy enforcement procedures, are likely to have a greater ability (i.e. a broader range of resources) to adjust to the alterity posed by the interpreter than newer entrants to the field (cf. Tipton 2010 for a further discussion of these aspects).

### **Macro-level perceptions of the occupational other**

The collection of data through interviews and survey methods is one example of how subjectively held understandings about the occupational other can be made discursively available to the self and the analyst allowing for new understandings to emerge. Interviews serve as a sense-making process by permitting reflection on actions past including the ways in which professional activity and identity is shaped by and during interaction, and the wider elements of workplace life. Epistemologically, accounts emphasise the role of the researcher in the joint construction of experiences past and so cannot be considered from a purely cognitivist perspective of a *reflection* of an individual's representation of the social world.

In the final part of this section, insights gained from interview data illuminate the type of macro level gaps in understanding that can occur at the interface between different professions. The data relates to a small

study involving a mixed method of data collection including focus groups with 50 participants, surveys and 17 one-to-one semi-structured interviews with primary service providers and interpreters which were transcribed and analysed using a combination of discourse and conversation analytical methods (Tipton 2012). The interviews focused on perceptions of the professional interculture as articulated through the relationship between the interpreter and the service provider (i.e. level of inter- and intra-professional solidarity), ‘professionalism’ in interpreter mediation, and (occupational) knowledge deficit, among others.

Firstly, in terms of wider knowledge deficits, primary service providers reported a general unawareness of the type of training and qualifications available for interpreters and, although they were confident in working with qualified or registered interpreters, they were generally unable to articulate what this means in practical terms or how they might adjust their work to different levels of competence displayed by interpreters. Initial experiences of service delivery through interpreters were often characterised by a sense of ‘drift’ due to a lack of intra-professional understanding about what interpreter mediation entails; however, over time, the ability to regain control appeared to developed through strategies that involved giving greater direction to the interpreter and being clearer about what was expected of their involvement during the interaction. The accounts suggest that strategies are developed at a local level through trial and error rather than through any coherent framework or direction at the institutional level.

In contrast, the interpreters’ accounts revealed a number of problems in assuming the interculture as a site of trust, apparently as a result of the cumulative effects of prior negative experiences of service providers; however, this negative perception was uncorroborated by the sample of service providers interviewed. Interestingly, the interpreters’ accounts indicated that the interpreters themselves often generate confusion during interaction, leading to mixed expectations and possibly antagonism through inconsistent behaviour. Furthermore, it suggests that

the interpreters do not always acknowledge the impact of their actions on the occupational other in the interactive process.

For instance, the interpreters interviewed (all of whom had trained to the same diploma level) reported awareness of the ethical imperatives of their role through the rejection of requests from service providers to provide comment and opinion on matters of substance in the interaction (in line with behaviour that is typically prescribed in interpreter codes of conduct). However, in at least two accounts, interpreters reported that they intervened as they 'saw fit'. Whether or not such interventions were warranted in the instances reported is a moot point here; what is salient is that inconsistencies in behaviour may weaken the intersubjective understanding in the dyadic relation by generating variable expectations on the part of service providers and impacting their ability to reflexively respond to the interpreter as the incoming occupational other.

Furthermore, the accounts suggest that the perceived lack of trust towards interpreters appears to result more from the interpreters' actions *in situ* than the primary service providers' lack of general understanding about the interpreter's role and profession. The interpreters' accounts revealed a tendency to attribute the problem to the service provider in terms of their failure to *understand* the interpreter's role as an abstract concept, which suggests that the interpreter tends to conceive of the role monolithically and not as something that is constructed and re-constructed in interaction. It also suggests that interpreters are less open to the alterity presented by the occupational other than they would perhaps assume.

Although accounts of perception or 'perceptual frames' (in recognition of the multiple lenses through which people view the social world) allow a degree of insight into aspects of self and other, they clearly present epistemological limitations. Aside from issues concerning the validity of truth claims, a focus on perception risks promoting a monological approach to communication that gives primacy to the



(universalist) notion of the autonomous rational individual as opposed to a socioculturally embedded one (Linell 2009: 44).

While a monological view of the service provider is legitimate in some instances as they are producers of ‘univocal texts’ (following Werstch, 1991) in the workplace through the provision of recommendations, assessments and decisions etc., such a view is limiting in the context of investigating orientations to other. To some extent, an emphasis on the discursive *construction* of intersubjective understanding is promoted through the process of retrospective account building in interviews, with the position of the interviewer allowing the sociocultural embeddedness of the other to be foregrounded dialogically.

### **Dialogicality and the problem of voice in the interculture**

The foregoing discussion highlights the potential of the research interview for revealing potential gaps and slippages in intersubjective understanding between different occupational groupings at a macro level, and serves as one example of how understanding of the occupational other can be made discursively available outside of the situated service encounter. Although the research interview can be categorised as a sense-making process that has the possibility to elicit understandings of self and other in the workplace, its status within a wider investigation of intersubjective understanding (and its associated truth claims) remains marginal.

Arguably, analytical primacy needs to be given to the emergent sense-making processes between the two main occupational agents at the point where their professional worlds interpenetrate *in situ*. However, the analytical process does not need to be limited to the triadic interaction with service users, important though this is; other instances of interaction such as pre- and post- encounter briefings are also important sites where the strength of intersubjective understanding can be evaluated as a discursive accomplishment, since these are sites where the interpreter and primary service provider engage in talk as direct addressees. It must be noted,

however, that spaces for such interaction are seldom created in the course of institutional service delivery due to constraints on the service provider's time. Nevertheless, the range of possible sites of interaction for analysis helps to support a view of intersubjectivity as an emergent process.

A process view is also supported by a dialogical approach to communication, which is further explored in this section. It is promoted *inter alia* by Linell (2009) as something that allows a more comprehensive view of dialogue to be achieved than is the case as in, for example, dialogue theory, and one that allows a more abstract notion of dialogue to be incorporated into the analytical process. Linell's 'ecumenical' approach, for example, draws on several largely mutually related approaches to language, cognition and communication, among which he cites phenomenology, social interactionism and social psychology as salient examples. The complexities of the interpreter-mediated encounter and its impact on institutional practice underscore the appeal of Linell's approach to dialogicality from an epistemological and ontological perspective.

The relevance of a dialogical approach is further strengthened through the challenge it poses to notions of dialogue in a general sense. Blommaert (2005), for example, draws on the notion of dialogicality to challenge the idea that dialogue presupposes co-operativity, since he asserts it is a meeting of 'different contextualisation universes', which, as Sarangi and Slembrouck (1992 cited in Blommaert, *ibid.*) observe, often conflict. Secondly, the idea that dialogue presupposes sharedness is also challenged on the basis of the variability in contextualisation universes that can occur. Finally, he challenges the presupposition that there is symmetry in contextualising power in dialogue, a presupposition that Blommaert claims has been generated through the 'Gricean-derived notion that participants in communication have equal access and control over contextualisation universes' (pp. 44-45).

The asymmetry in contextualising power that characterises the dyadic relation between interpreters and primary service providers is considered one of the largest barriers to enhanced intersubjective understanding in the intercultural. Although it is often assumed that interpreters are the most disadvantaged in terms of contextualising resources by virtue of spending most of their time outside of the institutional setting (Janzen and Shaffer 2008), the examples provided in section one draw attention to the variability in the contextualisation universes of *both* interactants. At the same time, such universes cannot be viewed as static and unevolving, and so the extent to which they are problematic for interactants will vary across time. To understand why asymmetry in contextualising power is such a barrier in interpreter mediation, the notion of ‘voice’ and the multivoicedness of meaning in the professional intercultural are discussed in what follows.

## **Voice**

In interpreter mediation, the ‘polyvocality’ of the intercultural presents a range of challenges for interactants *in situ* and for the researcher of intersubjective understanding. In a literal sense the interpreter’s voice can be distinguished as both a voice that re-presents the voice of the occupational other and the service user, and one that presents the interpreter as a professional agent. However, polyvocality also raises fundamental questions about ownership of meaning and the inherent multivoicedness of meaning in interpreter mediation, which is usefully illuminated by a dialogical approach to communication.

For instance, Wertsch (1991) discusses the connection between voice and dialogicality in relation to sociocultural approaches to mediated action. In drawing on the work of Bakhtin, he draws attention to the idea of there being two voices at play in ‘text’ production, namely a social language and a speech genre, and asserts that it is the ‘sociocultural situatedness’ of both of these speech types that leads to meaning being ‘inextricably linked with historical, cultural, and institutional setting’ (p.

66). It further underscores Bakhtin's rejection of the idea that isolated individuals create utterances and meaning (ibid.: 70).

As an illustration, Wertsch cites an example of research by Gilligan (1982) involving an interview with two eleven year olds about their responses to a moral dilemma. The analysis highlights one of the respondents' answers as indicative of her treating the questions posed by the interviewer as a dialogic text and not a univocal text as entailed by a transmission model of communication (ibid.: 77). In her analysis, Gilligan asserts that the girl 'is answering a different question from the one the interviewer thought had been posed' (1982: 31). If the scenario were transplanted into a multilingual context, the weaknesses generated in intersubjective understanding risk being all the greater, especially since the service provider has little way of knowing the extent to which the interpreter and / or the service user may treat a question as a dialogic text.

Blommaert (2005) presents a complementary conceptualisation of 'voice', which he defines, following Hymes (1996), as the 'the ways in which people manage to make themselves understood or fail to do so' (p. 68). For Blommaert, this capacity concerns an ability to 'generate an uptake of one's words as close as possible to one's desired contextualisation' (ibid.), and he asserts that the onus to create the most favourable conditions in the conversation to achieve 'take up' lies with the speaker. As indicated above in relation to Wertsch's example, in interpreter-mediated encounters the asymmetry in contextualising powers means that there are no guarantees that the speaker's desired contextualisation is achieved, and the options available to the service provider and service user for verifying the level of achievement are few. Such a realisation has also highlighted the limitations of the transmission (or conduit) model of communication in Interpreting Studies (cf. Mason 2000).

Finally, although an interpreter's voice may be *heard* in a literal sense, it may not be *attended to* in ways anticipated, as illustrated by Blommaert (2001) and Maryns (2006) in relation to processes of 're-textualisation and 'entextualisation' in the asylum process. This is illustrated through the notion of 'home narratives' (densely complex stories given by asylum seekers to explain what brought them to leave their country of origin) that both authors show often are considered unimportant in the bureaucratic process and filtered out or diluted in the final reporting stage. By not discursively signalling the rationale behind the lack of attention to the detail of the accounts to the interpreter or service user, the primary service provider is demonstrating his/her power in making judgements 'about what counts as meaningful or appropriate in a particular context' (Sarangi and Roberts, 1999.: 30). The process creates a dissonance that the interpreter is powerless to attend to since the resources for creating 'up take' of meaning lie beyond the interpreter and within the institutional power structure.

### **Professional voice and 'modes of talk'**

Roberts and Sarangi (1999: 480-482) provide a broader view of 'voice' in their discussion of 'modes of talk'. Although aware of the false dichotomies that can be generated by over-essentialist approaches to agents and their talk (cf. Silverman 1987), these scholars find a helpful distinction between so-called professional and institutional modes of talk. Candlin (1997: xi-xii), states that 'professional modes' demonstrate 'licensed belonging' on the basis of accredited skills and knowledge, and 'institutional modes' concern the exercise of authority and gatekeeping. However, scholars stress that although the distinction works well at a broad level, it is difficult to distinguish discursively.

Two examples of voice illustrate a number of issues mentioned in the foregoing discussion with specific reference to the professional voice or 'mode of talk' of the interpreter. Interpreter-mediated encounters provide very limited opportunities for the interpreter to demonstrate his or

her ‘licensed belonging’ as a professional. To some extent the ‘professional voice’ is observable in instances where shifts in positioning occur as the interpreter moves from re-presenting talk to actively coordinating others’ talk as Wadensjö (1998) highlights. However, in some cases the imperatives of doing (and being seen to do) a good job and increasing the likelihood of being employed again can push interpreters to over-exaggerate certain features of others’ talk in an attempt to promote their professional voice: ‘hyperformality’ is a salient example.

‘Hyperformal’ approaches to talk are something that Berk-Seligson (1990/2002) identified in her analysis of interpreter-mediated mock trials conducted in the USA. In a seminal study conducted in the late 1980s, interpreters were shown to consistently interpret witness testimony in a higher register than the original. The same phenomenon was also reported by service providers over twenty years later in the very different context of social work, which further emphasises the limited options open to interpreters in making the professional mode of talk discursively available during interaction.

In Berk-Seligson’s study, the motivation behind the hyperformality was identified as a desire to save face, but other reasons also need to be considered. For example, given that professional and non-professional interpreters work in the public services at any one time, the ability to make the professional voice heard weighs heavily on interpreting practitioners that are keen to establish public service interpreting on a firm professional footing within the institutional contexts of its use. This is especially true of the situation in Britain for example, where the hard-fought professional status of interpreters has recently been thrust into the spotlight in the context of outsourcing interpreting services *inter alia* by the Ministry of Justice.

For service providers, the ability to distinguish between the voices that re-present the service user and interpreters’ professional modes of talk

is essential in making accurate judgements about service user need. Most interviewees who reported instances of hyperformality in the study were able to recognise the difference and adjust their approach accordingly, but this cannot be assumed of all service providers. For those new to interpreter mediation in particular, there is a risk that the level of intersubjective understanding generated with the service user is diminished if the interpreter adds an unwarranted additional filter to the process of representing others' talk.

A second example of polyvocality in interpreter mediation highlights the issue that individuals simultaneously occupy several social (and even professional) roles, and the potential conflict that 'voices' associated with the different roles can entail. One social worker in the interview data reported undertaking ad hoc work as a non-professional interpreter in a different workplace setting to her own. The account described an encounter in which the interviewee had attempted to transfer a value learned within the social work profession to the interpreting process, namely the principle of 'acting in the service user's best interest', which the interviewee felt to be a benign and even universal feature of service cultures.

In the encounter in question, guidance was given to a service user on how to travel to a particular location in another city in order to complete a stage in the asylum process. The primary service provider in the meeting roundly criticised the intervention by the interpreter, thereby directly drawing attention to the problem of assuming the transferability of professional values and voices across role boundaries. In this case, the lack of interpreter training had clearly led to a misunderstanding of the interpreter's place within the intercultural and the 'voice' she was legitimately able to display. It serves as an example of how negative perceptions of interpreters can be generated and the need for service providers to reflexively attend to a range of interpreter competences in their work.

From the primary service providers' perspective, the multivoicedness of meaning generated through and by interpreter mediation has the potential to inhibit the power inherent in their institutional positions. This is especially illuminated through the concept of dialogicality and the 'texts' produced in the encounter, which can involve the interpreter 'imposing' meanings that are erroneously based on misplaced cues and interpretations of the beliefs, values and intentions of others' talk (Janzen and Shaffer 2008). Mitigating such risk requires cognizance of the features associated with the professional intercultural in terms of voice and contextualisation processes, some of which can be identified at the level of talk; however, the discussion above shows the importance of wider knowledge about the interpreting profession and its fragile social status in helping service providers anticipate and adapt to particular interpreter behaviours.

### **Insights from monolingual institutional encounters into the discursive accomplishment of intersubjective understanding**

The problems of polyvocality, dialogicality and multivoicedness of meaning previously discussed highlight a range of methodological issues in evaluating intersubjectivity as a process in interpreter mediation, especially in terms of identifying the 'authoritative voice' (following Wertsch, *ibid.*) in talk. In building an analytical framework to analyse intersubjectivity as a process, this final section explores several studies in monolingual service contexts and the potential of conversation analysis for investigating the phenomenon in question in multilingual encounters.

Research on cockpit talk between airline pilots, for instance, provides a rich source of data on interaction in sociotechnical settings in which space, tools and talk all combine in the production of shared understanding (Neville 2004, see also Auvinen 2009). Although the human services contexts in which interpreter mediation takes place do not replicate technical and spatial elements (or at least to the same extent),



sociotechnical studies still provide a useful contrast, not least as Nevile (ibid.: 9) observes, because the problems with pilot performance ‘usually do not involve pilots’ individual competence, that is their technical knowledge or ability to control their plane, but a problem in the way the pilots communicate and act in specific circumstances as a team’.

Drawing on Peräkylä (2004: 166-167), Auvinen (2009: 36) asserts that intersubjective understanding is a core assumption that underpins research in the conversation analytic tradition since ‘talk creates and maintains intersubjective reality’. In the cockpit, Auvinen (ibid.: 69) stresses the importance of this assumption by linking it to an institutional imperative, namely that ‘[t]he airline pilots’ intersubjective sense of ongoing action is an important precondition for the safe and efficient conduct of the flight’. Although in some circumstances safety may be a key outcome of interpreter mediation, in many institutional settings where it is used, imperatives of social justice also need to be highlighted; this suggests that a process view of intersubjectivity needs to take account of the broader institutional context than just the level of interaction.

The highly circumscribed setting of the cockpit presupposes a high level of initial intersubjective understanding and symmetry in contextualisation universes between interactants. The emphasis on agents to discursively express understanding on a moment-by-moment basis marks a clear difference between the relevance of conversation analysis in this context and contexts where interpreter mediation is used. In other words, the focus on the site of cockpit interaction as its own ‘bracketed off’ universe raises questions as to importance of context in the analysis of intersubjectivity as a process.

As has been widely documented, conversation analysis tends to adopt ‘a strictly empirical focus that does not *a priori* speculate about the institutional meaning of interaction, but aims at characterizing it through a detailed examination of naturally-occurring activities’ (Arminen 2005: 32). For many analysts working within the tradition, notions of context as being

'pre-given' is challenged, leading to a focus on the observable properties of interaction itself (Arminen, *ibid.*: 33); for others (e.g. Holmes et al. 1999), wider context is crucial for understanding discourse and contextualisation universes, and defining social identity.

Nevile's (*ibid.*) study uses conversation analysis to demonstrate that intersubjective understanding is a complex semiotic task involving both talk and non-verbal activity. For example, a pilot will repeat a command out loud in accordance with an institutional scripted procedure to show it has been both heard and understood so that the next task in the sequence can go ahead (e.g. on takeoff). Non-verbal activities might concern the observation that the hand of a pilot has been moved back to a 'home position' thereby marking 'a possible ending to a spate or unit of activity' (Schegloff 1998: 542 cited in Nevile *ibid.*: 104).

The range of resources available to service providers in interpreter mediation for checking the level of understanding of co-present others (interpreters and service providers) is much more limited. Although cockpit interaction appears as a much more complex semiotic accomplishment than interpreter mediation, the highly circumscribed nature of communication makes it much easier for interactants to achieve a more reliable sense of joint intentionality and orientation to other. Nevile also demonstrated this aspect through the distinction he makes between institutional and professional modes of talk at the discursive level using CA as an approach.

What appears as a relatively expedient method for ascertaining ongoing understanding (e.g. repetition of word or phrase) in the cockpit is likely to confuse rather than support the development of mutual understanding in interpreter mediation because of fragmented turn-taking. Discursive techniques such as summarising and asking for the same information through different questioning strategies are ways in which social workers, for example, reported verifying the level of intersubjective

understanding with the service user in the interviews conducted; however, there appeared much less concern about whether joint intentionality had been achieved with the interpreter.

Additionally, there are spatio-environmental signs in interpreter mediation (such as gaze, hand gestures, etc) that also help to account for intersubjective understanding, which suggest, as in the cockpit analysis, that talk and non talk activity cannot be dissociated in evaluating intersubjective understanding *in situ*. It is anticipated that non verbal activity is a core method for ascertaining the level of understanding between interpreters and service providers given the limited scope in the triad for discursively checking and negotiating the extent to which meaning has been contextualised in the same way.

## **Conclusion**

The interculture formed as the worlds of the interpreter, primary service provider, and service user interpenetrate in multilingual service encounters is described as a site where meaning is inherently fragile and multivoiced. A process view of intersubjective understanding that is underpinned by a dialogical approach to human communication underscores the value of broadening the analysis of its discursive accomplishment to a range of interaction types and sites, including the research interview and direct encounters between the service provider and interpreter.

Although a conversational analytical approach to interaction allows some insight into the discursive means available for interactants to display their professional identity and ongoing understanding of interaction, it appears to preclude a comprehensive account of intersubjective understanding as a process in interpreter mediation. Its epistemological limitations, like those of the perceptual accounts described in section one, therefore need to be acknowledged.

In particular, conversation analysis appears to present limitations in terms of accounting for the asymmetry in contextualising universes present in interpreter mediation. The intercultural meeting point of professional territories, values, and beliefs suggests that the wider process of intersubjective understanding in interpreter mediation is more usefully analysed as a chain of interlinked events that operate on several levels: some discursive and reflexive (observable *in situ*) and others discursive and reflective (that are *constructed* beyond the interpreter-mediated encounter).

In research that seeks an explicit grounding in an ethics of practical relevance, context and especially the sociocultural situatedness of voice and institutional timeframes, need to be at the foreground in the analytical process. Therefore, a combined approach involving conversation analysis of interaction *in situ* and wider, discursively constructive sense-making practices is promoted.

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