

Interactive comment on “Interview and translation strategies: coping with multilingual settings and data” by B. Filep

M. Hannah (Editor)

mch@aber.ac.uk

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Comments on “Interview and translation strategies: coping with multilingual settings and data”, by B. Filep

This paper is valuable primarily for its detailed analysis of a range of translation problems attaching to multilingual research. Concrete methodological issues such as whether to opt for literal or free translation, whether to use an interpreter or communicate in a third language mutually available to interviewer and interviewee, how to deal with expressions in one language lacking any equivalent in the other... all of these are important and frequently unavoidable issues. In addition, the empirical materials drawn from the author’s work in the Carpathian Basin are interesting in their own right and richly suggestive of the sheer complexity of some translation problems. It is appro-

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appropriate to include this survey in the initial discussion phase of the special issue ‘Lost in translation?’. However much the intellectual context for thinking about translation has changed in recent decades as a result of the ‘cultural’ and ‘linguistic turns’ in the human sciences, it is salutary to remind ourselves that some aspects of the problematic of translation remain essentially the same.

Yet the context has changed, and it is possible to argue that this paper takes only partial and inadequate account of recent shifts in scholarly discourses and research practices. In this commentary, I will highlight two such shifts: the ‘linguistic turn’ and what might be termed the ‘collective model’ of how research is actually carried out. In both cases, the paper shows signs of not having engaged sufficiently with current intellectual arguments and ways of working.

The importance of the ‘linguistic turn’ may appear larger from within the Anglophone world than it would to a scholar working in the Swiss context. As the paper in this issue by Ulrich Best makes clear, even understanding how to ‘place’ either ‘the Anglophone world’ or ‘the Swiss context’ in relation to regional, multipolar maps of discursive domination is a tricky matter. (Best 2009) These caveats notwithstanding, though, many European scholars share with their Anglophone colleagues a well-developed awareness of the ‘linguistic turn’. The linguistic turn can be summarized as a heightened sensitivity to all the ways in which traditionally recognized theoretical constructions of social reality and forms of apparently ‘objective’ evidence in fact depend upon, are mediated through, and thus fail to ‘escape from’ or ‘refer beyond’ systems of linguistic signification. While not every social scientist prioritizes deconstruction, most now recognize that very few claims for ‘objective’ knowledge or ‘undistorted’ communication can be made to stick.

While the author of the paper under discussion here is familiar with some basic claims of social constructivism (pages 28-29) and with the terminology of Saussure (page 29), at other points the paper expresses a wish to “avoid” or “prevent” “misunderstandings” (pages 26, 28, and 45). Such terminology seems to point to a regulative ideal of

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transparency and undistorted communication that most social scientists (and probably even scholars of translation) no longer consider supportable. Concepts such as “warranted assertability”, “intersubjectivity”, “conventional models of truth”, etc. have been in circulation for decades now as so many attempts to describe how communication in some sense still ‘works’ without relying upon assumptions of undistorted transparency or perfect understanding. It is against the background of this linguistic turn, for example, that the suggestion made by Crane, Lombard and Tenz in this special issue must be situated. (Crane, Lombard and Tenz 2009) They portray the problems arising in multilingual translation settings as more intense and explicit forms of the very same problems confronting almost any research in the human sciences that relies (as it must) on notions of communication. All social science research, that is, inevitably involves the problems often mistakenly associated only with ‘translation’ in the narrower sense. It would be interesting to see how the author of the paper under discussion here might react to this suggestion.

The second aspect of the paper that seems oddly anachronistic has to do with the model of the multilingual scholar it seems to imply. The paper argues that “[t]he researcher is thus confronted with the “requirement” and the expectation of a high linguistic flexibility and cultural competence” in the region or field of research. (page 27) Put briefly, why does a single researcher have to be multilingual? Depending on the research project, it is increasingly common for teams of researchers to work together, for reasons which may often include ensuring sufficiently wide linguistic competence. Multilingual competence on the scale displayed by the author is certainly admirable. But how necessary is it?

It is important to be reminded, as this paper does, of those aspects of scholarly work that remain relatively unchanged beneath the turbulence of paradigm shifts, ‘turns’, etc. Yet at the same time, and as the other reviewer also mentions, the paper would gain in importance if it were linked more solidly to current debates. (Jones 2009) A good start would be made even just by reflecting upon the other papers in this special issue.

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