Discourse Theory and Performance-Based Assessment: Two Tools for Professional Interpreting

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This paper explores interpreter evaluation and highlights the shortcomings of a lexico-semantic approach. It advises using discourse theory elements to pinpoint some of the competences required for interpretation and suggests creating evaluation tools with the kind of technical rigor found in other professions. The work provides examples of discursive aspects utilized in interpretation and demonstrates how one may use these components to create a rubric for rating interpreter performance.
Interest in assessment in the field of interpreting may take a variety of forms. For instance, applicant screening before admission may be desired by interpreting training programs. At the conclusion of their education, student interpreters may be evaluated by programs to see if they are prepared for the needs of the labor market. Working interpreters could want to evaluate their own performance while performing their duties, or they might want to know customer satisfaction with their offerings. For the purpose of professional certification, interpreters are evaluated the most frequently.

Professional associations of interpreters create and administer certification tests in jurisdictions all over the world to determine which interpreters have the qualifications necessary to uphold strict professional standards. This work discusses interpreter licensing and contends that a perspective on interpreting

restricted to lexico-semantic issues, as shown by students' work and current assessment methods, is insufficient. It emphasizes the significance of addressing technical measuring principles common in the assessment of other professions and draws attention to discourse theory as a way of establishing a more comprehensive picture of the competences required of interpreters. An assessment rubric is provided at the end of the article as an illustration of how discourse theory could be applied to create a practical assessment tool.
For the purposes of this discussion, the term professional interpreting is used to refer to two modes of oral translation—conference interpreting (between two spoken languages) and sign language interpreting (between a spoken and a sign language). These two modes, and the professions that have grown up around them, share a number of features. First, they have a common neuropsychological foundation, which suggests that the cognitive skills involved are similar, if not the same. Second, the recognized professions of conference interpreter and sign language interpreter have only been in existence for a short time.
Any assessment of interpreters must determine whether they are competent, that is, whether they have the complex skills—or competencies—needed to meet professional standards. Use of the term competency is founded on two beliefs: 1) the components of a competency interact in an intricate way, and do not work independently of one another; and 2) competencies are strongly linked to context—they must be assessed in a context that resembles the one in which they were acquired (Resnick and Resnick 1992).

The definition of translation is frequently oversimplified by the general public. They see translation as a lexico-semantic exercise that modifies the language's structure by replacing each word in the source language's vocabulary with a matching word in the target language. Student interpreters who come to training programs from the general public, carry these reductive perceptions with them. As a result, interpreting is frequently considered to be a lexico-semantic activity since it is an oral type of translation.

Modality is a second aspect of discourse that is relevant to the process of interpreting. People convey their attitude toward their own utterances through modality. For example, an utterer may, depending on intonation, express a degree of uncertainty in a sentence like, "I think it will rain today." Rather than being a statement that only gives information about exterior, neutral events, the sentence gives us a sense of how the utterer feels about what has been said. When constructing an argument, utterers also give information about themselves, since they are indicating their position on a topic and perhaps even making an effort to win the receiver of the utterance over to their point of view. A series of argumentative utterances is steered in a particular direction by an internal conclusion, a conclusion that is chosen in advance by the speaker (Ducrot 1980).

It is important for interpreters to realize that the links utterers create between units of information are motivated by this internal conclusion (Ducrot 1980). As a result, an interpretation should not be the simple list of featureless target language equivalents: the argumentative direction the source language utterer embarks on should be maintained and reproduced in the target language.

In oral conversation, linkages between informational units are created at both the syntactic and prosodic levels. These choices—this argumentative direction—can be heard in the intonational contour speakers give to their utterances when they provide extra information, contrasting information, or an example or illustration. Interpreters need to have special training in order to identify these contours, comprehend how they express an argument, and replicate a similar structure in the target language.

It can be concluded that within the restricted scope of these pages, potential applications of discourse theory to professional interpretation have not yet been fully explored. Similar to this, there is still a lot of work to be done in the creation of rigorous interpreter assessment. Future studies might focus on characterizing the entire collection of competencies—in terms of context and content, required to execute at a professional level. Alternately, by concentrating on measures of validity, reliability, equity, utility, or comparability, it may start to provide some much-needed work on quality assurance in interpreter assessment.

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