

Preface

This book has its origins in my interest in the enduring issue of incommensurability in language and culture. The complex issue of the relationship between language, culture, and thought often settles around the theme of incommensurability, which can be a matter of the capacity for understanding evident between minds as much as between cultures, and always mediated by some communicative form. The products and processes of translation can symbolize the key to the often submerged but occasionally glimpsed 'holy grail' of mutual understanding so commonly lost in the face of human diversity, at the same time they can represent its ultimate impossibility. My own intellectual trajectory with respect to this question has taken a somewhat circuitous route. Though my original field of research was, broadly speaking, sociolinguistics, sociological and philosophical methods of analysis have guided my thinking the most. Since being introduced to the field of translation and interpreting about a decade ago, these methods have continued to inform my research. Within this field, incommensurability has been examined mainly with regard to the translation of written texts, especially through the interrogation of the notion of equivalence. This issue has not been accorded the same attention with regard to the translation of the spoken word. Perhaps this is due to the face to face immediacy of spoken interpreted encounters which has encouraged more attention to the cognitive demands of the interpreter's task. Paradoxically, within the field, the problem of the unacknowledged visibility of the translator of written texts has received more critical attention than the questionable insistence on the invisibility of the highly visible interpreter of spoken utterances. This book addresses this deficiency through an examination of the status of interpreters' visibility in institutional contexts where interpreters are spatially and temporally co-present with others in situations of considerable moral, ethical, and political significance. In these situations, I argue, the challenge for interpreters involves an instantly demanded ethical and political response.

In the book, relationships amongst the relevant actors, communicative acts, and institutional settings are interpreted implicitly through a Bourdieusian approach, though unlike this approach more generally, I am concerned

to represent both the communicative and social practices that emerge from underlying structures and the agents who perform them. For many sociolinguists, this must also include micro-analysis of the discursive strategies which these agents carry out. This is not my aim, however. What interests me more is what motivates and compels communicating agents' responses to one another. For insights regarding these processes, I rely on philosophical discourses on inter-subjective understanding amongst similar or diverse others. The book thus attempts to characterize the social and moral spaces in which the translation of the spoken word occurs in ways that reflect the realities of the trans-nationally constituted, locally and globally informed environments in which interpreters work.

Chapter 1 presents a perspective on language, culture, and thought that is informed by insights from linguistic anthropology and linguistic philosophy, reading these via a pragmatist mode of inquiry. The pragmatist perspective introduced in this chapter serves as the foundation for the central arguments of the book: that all endeavors toward mutual understanding between different perspectives involve cooperative human action in interaction with the environment; and that this is a dialectical process involving fragmentation and incoherence as much as increasing coherence and integration.

Chapter 2 examines the ethical nature of all communicative encounters. I explore the value and potential limitations of neo-Kantian and non-Kantian approaches to ethical communication, with special reference to discourse ethics and its implicit influence on interpreter codes of ethics, particularly as evidenced in the principles of impartiality and neutrality. The chapter reiterates the view that languages are not divided from one another as incompatible systems, particularly where this view suggests the need for a master vocabulary or system of meta-rules that would permit the commensuration of all discourse. It concludes that the justification for different beliefs articulated in communication is not achieved through metaphysical guarantees, but through the very fissures, contradictions, and innovations that it is the task of translation to reveal, not to obscure.

Chapter 3 introduces the contrasting concepts of 'role' morality, which claims objectivity through a discourse of professionalism, and 'ordinary' morality, which is perceived as subjective, whether individually or culturally based. In this chapter, I link these concepts to the interpreting profession where individual ethical responses to an interpreting situation are negatively associated with partiality and are, therefore, considered violations of professional codes. I then examine debates over legal ethics, particularly with regard to lawyers' neutral partisanship toward their clients to demonstrate some distinctive and instructive parallels between the legal practitioners and interpreters. In both professions, I argue that from a sociological perspective, the notion of role morality ensures the maintenance of structural hierarchies of power and knowledge, and from a philosophical standpoint, it encourages moral unaccountability.

Chapters 4 and 5 present further empirical support for the theoretical arguments presented in the previous chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on the function of interpreting and interpreters in the asylum system, taking as its starting point the question of hospitality and the irresolvable tension involved in the ethical demand to grant safe haven to outside others, and the hard realities of national sovereignty and global politics. Based on in-depth interviews I conducted from 2002 to 2007 with the relevant players in the asylum adjudication process—judges, lawyers, applicants, and their interpreters—the chapter considers the different alliances that were formed amongst these individuals and the extent to which these partnerships were aimed at contributing to the overall presence of a justice-seeking ethics in the asylum system. Chapter 5 examines the motivations behind the decisions taken by Iraqis and other Arabic speakers to serve as interpreters and translators for the U.S. military in the Iraq war, taking into account the justifications for the invasion and occupation based on the principles of Just War theory. I also consider the range of motivating factors, as reported in media accounts, which were involved in these decisions, including: personal histories, economic factors, politics, and patriotism. As in the previous chapter, I consider the different types of alliances that emerged between interpreters and military personnel—particularly in the face of the often complex friend-enemy distinction that war creates—and the ethical demand these generated for both. Both chapters highlight the tensions between the relevant actors, their communicative objectives, and the institutional—juridical, political, and military—settings in which their actions are embedded.

Chapter 6 circles back to the question of the interpreter's visibility and its central role in a reinvigorated ethics of interpreting. This chapter considers the historical lack of perceived ties between the translation of written and spoken language despite the ethical issues common to both. I suggest that though part of the reason for this may lie with the linguistic orientation of much interpreting research, it is also true that translation scholars have not perceived any theoretical common ground between spoken texts and fictional or nonfictional works. I conclude that, despite important differences in the ethical relationships that interpreters and translators develop due to the distinct environments in which they work, there are sufficient overlaps to suggest the possibility of greater collaboration in research and practice and, especially, a more productive dialogue between the two domains in the areas of language, ethics, and politics.