Escaping the invisibility trap

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interviewed by
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Introduction

In May 2021, I had the privilege of sitting down—remotely—for a conversation with Professor Michael Cronin to discuss his analysis of the current moment and the possible future direction(s) for interpreting and interpreters. Prof. Cronin has published numerous titles that have had a decisive influence on the field of translation studies, including Translation and Globalization (2003); Translation and Identity (2006); Translation Goes to the Movies (2008); Translation in the Digital Age (2012); and Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene (2016). Through my own research on interpreter training in Kenya and multilingual communication in humanitarian and development organisations (see Delgado Luchner, 2019, 2020), I was familiar with some of Prof. Cronin’s work, but this conversation allowed me to gain a better understanding of the underlying vision and values informing his research and to discover the utopian within the scholar.

Interview

Prof. Cronin, thank you very much for accepting this conversation for Interpreting and Society. The vision that you have laid out in your research so far aligns well with the scope of this journal, both your earlier work that problematises the Eurocentric nature of interpreting and your more recent work on eco-translation.

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Thank you very much. I am delighted that a journal of this kind is emerging because the idea of looking at interpreters in social and political contexts is something I have long argued for and that is of fundamental importance.

We are recording this interview remotely, which a few years ago might have been surprising. But the current COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated changes in the way we work and remote work is becoming a new norm. For interpreters, this has created many uncertainties around the status of the profession and how we see ourselves. How do you see the current moment?

We can see these developments in two timescales: the shorter timescale of the pandemic and the longer timescale of “cognitive capitalism...” Regarding the shorter timescale of the pandemic, one of the consequences of the shift to remote working and the emptying out of office buildings is that this development now applies not only to interpreters but to any other participant in contemporary society. Remote interpreting is thus a subset of a much wider shift towards remote work in the context of the pandemic.

The longer timescale of cognitive capitalism refers to a form of economic activity that places “immaterial” knowledge at its heart. The basic aim is to streamline all circuits of distribution of information in a system. The contemporary cognitive economic model is based on speed as a key differentiator: the faster you can circulate goods and services, the more income you generate. That applies to information as well. The faster information can circulate, the more valuable it becomes. Interpreting is part of this information loop and the more you can “flatten” the interpreter to insert her seamlessly into this circuit of information, the more lucrative it becomes. One of the ways to achieve this is to immobilsie the interpreter and incorporate her into the cognitive circuit of advanced capitalism. The more immobile the interpreter is, the lower are the mobility costs. An interpreter who does not have to fly is an interpreter who does not need an air ticket. The less she moves, the less she costs, and the more her employer makes from the information she generates.

This only works if you get buy-in from the interpreters themselves, that is, you have to persuade interpreters that this is part of what they need to do. Here, there are two main factors, pull and push. The requirements of the market are the pull factor—as remote interpreting becomes widespread, you have to upscale to adapt to this development to survive as an interpreter. There is a clear economic incentive for interpreters to adapt to this new way of working. The push factor, however, has to do with internal self-representation. If your ethical and professional ideal is seeing yourself as a neutral conduit through which information passes unimpairred, unimpeded, unprejudiced and unbiased—almost as a transparent screen—then you become a perfect match for the needs of the model of cognitive capitalism. You are “pushed,” if you will, by an inherited notion of professional ethics, to fit into an image of self as the friction-free channel for information transfer.

Is this ethical framework, in turn, a product of that same economic model or a relic of a different time that is no longer fit for purpose?

The origins of the ethics of interpreting, and conference interpreting in particular, are to be sought in international diplomacy, rather than in political economy. After the Second World War, the dominant idea was that the competing nationalisms, which had given rise to two world wars, could not continue unimpeded. This led to the creation of
a set of institutions for international cooperation: the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the Bretton Woods organisations all emerged in that post-war period. To move away from the zero sum game of international conflict and pave the way for a successful multilateralism, you need a notion of neutrality. This is the background to professional interpreter ethics but these origins in the multilateral model have since been repurposed for the contemporary market paradigm.

This is why there is a certain sense of discomfort and bewilderment among many conference interpreters today. They feel committed to this ethical ideal of neutrality and invisibility because they identify with the utopian project of its origins; however, this very same principle now allows for them to be instrumentalised for a particular form of income-generation.

Has this understanding of neutrality and invisibility as a central tenet also shaped interpreting research?

Absolutely. I have long criticised the lack of a strong phenomenological tradition in interpreting studies. Certain approaches in interpreting research, especially those that were dominant in the field between the 1970s and the 1990s, seem to think of the interpreter as an isolated person in a booth—a disembodied brain. This is linked to what Laurence Venuti (2019) in *Contra Instrumentalism* has recently described as the instrumentalist paradigm in translation. This is the notion that translation is about transferring a totality of meaning from one language to another, the idea that a semantic invariant can somehow be carried across languages. We see this tendency in how interpreting is usually defined and represented. According to the instrumentalist paradigm, the interpreter is very much a conduit, a disembodied presence in the booth that performs an act of “cognitive transfer.”

Scientifically, this is part of the positivist paradigm that is central to the Western tradition, the idea of the human being as a disembodied rational agent who never falls sick, who doesn’t have aging parents, who doesn’t raise small children, who doesn’t have bothersome siblings, that is, a pure mind floating free of cultural, sentimental, emotional attachments. This conceptualisation of the rational agent became the founding paradigm for much of the scientific research in conference interpreting and it is aligned with the much broader instrumentalist model that Venuti describes and which is pervasive in translation studies.

In community or dialogue interpreting, is a different approach emerging—maybe one with a stronger phenomenological dimension?

In my book *Translation and Identity* (Cronin, 2006), I included a chapter entitled “Interpreting Identity” where I analyse how interpreters are represented in a number of important texts and documents, for instance records of historical events, Shakespeare’s plays, and songs. In *Translation Goes to the Movies* (Cronin, 2008) I look at representation in films. Again and again, interpreters are centre-stage in these works. We talk about invisibility, but in fiction interpreters are often at the heart of the narrative in everything from the *Night at the Opera* to *Arrival* or *The Interpreter*. I believe it is all about embodied presence. When you have these important events bringing together groups with different languages and different amounts of power, the interpreter is essential to ensuring that this exchange can take place. However, because she is bodily present, she must read
the “temperature” of the room and be sensitive to the geopolitical nature of the gathering, because her life often depends on it.

One reason why many interpreters have been killed in recent conflicts is because they were physically present in moments of tense exchange. Interpreting is thus fundamentally a phenomenological act, involving the presence of a physical, that is, mortal, human being in a given space. This presence explains why in fiction, interpreters often have this testimonial function.

An important contribution of community interpreting research is precisely in situating the interpreter in a specific context. This then allows us to question notions of neutrality, non-partisanship or invisibility, because the context is often one of power asymmetry.

This is also where the extractivist dimension comes into play, as interpreters are used to extract information. I have just completed a book on the relationship between travel writing and the environment, for which I analysed a travel account by Sir Walter Raleigh, the English navigator and close companion of Queen Elizabeth I, who went to Guyana in search of gold. In his account, he consistently highlighted the importance of natives who could act as interpreters between him and the various groups on the different islands. His view of these interpreters is purely extractivist and instrumentalist. He aims to extract information that will weaken the local population politically, economically and socially. From Raleigh’s point of view, he absolutely wants the interpreters to give him unbiased and unprejudiced information that relates directly to empirical facts about the existence of crops, minerals, populations that could be enslaved, and so on, but from the point of view of the indigenous population, they do not want this kind of ethics. They do not want an interpreter who by being “impartial” contributes ultimately to feeding the ecocidal project of the sugar plantations.

In this case, it seems that the interpreters are providing factual information not as a translation of what the natives are saying, but rather based on knowledge they gained in their capacity as members of that group. Is this still related to impartiality as interpreters view it, that is, as the impartial transmission of the message without additions, only of what is said with the intention of being translated?

Yes and no. The speaker who has given the information may not want it to be used in a specific way, but the interpretation of intention is a complex issue as there is no objective standard for interpreting the intentionality of the speaker. Furthermore, when you are interpreting—and this is corroborated by research in different interpreting settings—the audience is important. We have a notion of impartiality, but this needs to be negotiated against the notion of “intelligibility.” To make something intelligible for the likes of Raleigh, the information needs to be presented in a specific way. But this transformation for the purpose of intelligibility already compromises the notion of impartiality—this is why we need much more complex approaches to understand what goes on in this interpreting transaction.

The difficulty with traditional ethical codes is that they are based on understandings of knowledge, understandings of the subject, understandings of information and understandings of the context that, I think, are no longer fit for purpose. The recorded experience of the calamities of slavery, colonisation, global conflict and impending ecological catastrophe mean that disembodied, decontextualised notions of understanding and communication are no longer tenable.
Does this mean that impartiality becomes most problematic in the presence of power asymmetry?

I think so, yes. The notion of impartiality is very much bound up with minority settings—in the sense of rich White people talking to each other. This is a minority experience on the planet, but it has become universalised, even though the overwhelming majority of people on this planet are neither rich, nor White, and have very different levels of power and income than this minority. The experience of this majority population is the base model for our planet and that is the real ethical challenge: how do we conceive of ethical frameworks that are much more applicable to the vast majority of human beings, rather than universalising and extrapolating the socio-economic experience of a small fraction of humanity?

Maybe we could get closer to an answer based on another example of a minority generalising their experience that has very directly impacted interpreters: English is now increasingly used as a lingua franca. On the one hand, interpreters view this as an obvious threat to their profession; on the other hand, I feel that there is also a certain irony to this reaction, given that professional interpreters have always only covered a very tiny fraction of the languages spoken on the planet. The vast majority of the world’s languages are not taken into account in interpreter training, in interpreting provisions at large gatherings and even in many community interpreting settings. Are interpreters good ambassadors of linguistic diversity?

The point you have raised here is fundamental. From my perspective, the only future for professional interpreting is the radical embrace of bio-cultural diversity. Otherwise, what will happen is the inevitable triumph of English as a global lingua franca. This has all kinds of very worrying political and socio-cultural implications. The profession must fundamentally embrace the principle of diversity and radically rethink the kinds of languages that are taught, where they are taught and in what contexts. Western societies apply two radically different rankings of the multilingual fact. If I can speak French, Spanish, Portuguese, English, German and Russian, people think “Wow, this is so impressive!,” but if I tell you that I speak “English, Pashto, Arabic and some Hindi,” then, well, I am most likely come across as an immigrant who speaks these languages because he had no choice.

There is a huge distinction between “elite multilingualism” and “vernacular multilingualism.” I was brought up with two languages: Irish Gaelic and English. Irish Gaelic is a minority language and English is a large global lingua franca. In my country there are now more native speakers of Polish than there are speakers of Irish Gaelic; however, only one out of the seven universities in Ireland teaches Polish. The same applies to many other groups in Ireland who have preserved their language of origin: Chinese, Filipinos, Latvians and others. The kind of multilingualism practised in modern language departments is completely detached from the kind of multilingualism that is actually practised 500 m down the road from the university, on the bus, or on the tram, or on the train to another city. There are so many languages that are not taught in universities, nor taken into account in interpreting or translation study programmes. I really think it is high time that we had a rethink about this.

This is one of the key aspects of eco-translation: bio-cultural diversity is fundamental to the survival of our body of knowledge and our discipline, and we must therefore
mobilise ourselves around this principle. Our potential contribution to human thought is enormous, but we need to move outside the limits of our existing comfort zone.

What you say about different kinds of multilingualism deeply resonates with me, as this is what I experienced repeatedly when working in Kenya or South Africa—some languages are viewed as languages that have their place inside a university, and others are not. I think this, in turn, is closely related to how we think of language in translation studies, where we view a language as a finite system with clear rules and clear borders, a beginning and an end. This is in line with the Western tradition that views language as linked to the ideal of the nation state and thus something to be institutionalised, rather than viewing language much more in terms of the multiple communicative resources of individual speakers. One of the first principles of the concept of multilingualism that we rely on in interpreting studies is the separation of languages. The way any two languages are allowed to interact through translation is clearly circumscribed. Code-mixing is proscribed. I wonder therefore: is translation really the best way to preserve bio-cultural diversity? Translation strikes me as a way of growing two crops on two different fields and then carrying things back and forth between the two, but that is not how diversity is expressed in nature, is it?

No. And this has to do with the fundamental view of translation itself. One thing that has always bothered me is the metaphorical view of translation as a bridge between languages and cultures. This narrative (see Baker, 2005) is so pervasive that it has become an icon for translation. So there is one language and one culture on one side, another language and another culture on the other side and then you have translation as a bridge between the two. But the more I looked at the history of my own country and how contacts between English and Irish speakers played out, the more I found this image to be very inappropriate. It just did not work. The problem with the bridge metaphor is that it misrepresents the language realities on the ground. So I started thinking: what if you get down from the bridge and into the water? The body of water touches both banks. It has contact with both at the same time and mixes them in a liminal space. The river itself in turn also defines its banks. This seems to me to be a much more accurate metaphor of how translation operates.

One of the recent movements in linguistics research that I find very relevant in thinking about this is translanguaging. For instance, in their chapter on translation and translanguaging, Mike Baynham and Tong King Lee (2019) critique the dominant monolingual paradigm that indeed views languages as these self-contained bodies of expression and knowledge. They argue that the vast majority of people on the planet have a language repertoire with different levels of knowledge and use these resources in different settings as appropriate. For me, this is a perfect illustration of the fluid metaphor of translation, or rather the “fluvial” metaphor as opposed to the “pontifical” metaphor. The “pontifical”—derived from “pontifex,” meaning bridge maker/builder—is a term bound up with hierarchy and authority.

You are absolutely correct. I have always been uneasy with this aspect, since the multilingualism that translators and interpreters are advocating for as a profession is rooted in monolingualism, and does not generalise well to non-Western contexts. It is a product of the monolingual paradigm, which rests on the assumption that translators and
interpreters are two monolinguals in one—and that their clients are mainly monolingual. And that assumption does not hold up to scrutiny. So that begs the question, as a profession, where do we go from there, how, if at all, do we remain relevant?

Based on historical research and my lived experience, I would answer as follows: when you have multilingual people together with these different translingual repertoires, having someone who is there as an interpreter and who fully inhabits that translingual space can greatly facilitate communication. People have greater or lesser degrees of knowledge of different languages and good interpreters make communication more fluid—to go back to the fluvial metaphor. They make things go more fluidly because they compensate for the gaps in knowledge on either side. The difference, and this is what marks out the interpreter from the translingual, lies in the degrees of self-reflexivity when inhabiting that space and being in that role. A properly-trained interpreter knows how to bring the different repertoires into contact with each other for a specific aim. What happens to this kind of interpreter, the translingual interpreter, when they are physically removed from the setting and working remotely?

Well, it is much more difficult and we have a lot of evidence from research in medical settings, for instance, to point to this. When you are deprived of the very important phenomenological knowledge that you gain through physical presence, then you seriously lack access to an information store that you need. With the rise of remote interpreting, if there is to be greater self-reflexivity around the translingual, which I do not think is currently there, then this would have to be somehow compensated for in remote interpreting. How that is going to happen is not immediately clear to me. But the most important thing is that we begin to ask the question.

Fundamentally, interpreting must challenge the foundational monolingualism at the heart of the discipline. This may seem ironic but the founding ideology of conference interpreting was “additional monolingualism,” that is, the view that multilingualism is but the serial addition of different languages. Real-life language practice must lead us to think differently, and make translingualism, and not monolingualism, the foundation for our profession and discipline.

For instance, when working as an interpreter between French and English, I often interpreted for French delegates who had a reasonably good knowledge of English, even though they were hesitant to speak it. So when interpreting, I was always wondering what was necessary to say as opposed to what they understood. I gradually began to alter my output to take account of their translingual knowledge and adapt my interpretation to what they needed.

From your example, I realise that in many conference settings, especially in international organisations, interpreters were already physically removed from the scene before remote interpreting became prominent. We sit in a booth where we are often deprived of any immediate feedback from our delegates; you just interpret everything that is said, since you may not even know who is listening to you. So you really are a disembodied voice in those settings.

In the current situation, there is obviously great uncertainty around very practical considerations. Many interpreters wonder whether their profession and their skill set will still enable them to earn a living in the future. You have outlined the potential relevance of interpreters’ skills to society, but the fact that there is a need does not
necessarily mean that there is also a market. Currently, the economic incentives seem to be misaligned. We know what could be done, what would be meaningful, that there is a need for the kind of translingual interpreter that you have described, but how does this work economically?

This is closely linked with questions of value. What accrues value in the current situation is a form of transaction that is instrumentalist and extractivist. The more you can instrumentalise, the more you can extract, the greater the return on investment. The difficulty with this model is that it will kill us. The reason we are in the kind of situation that we are in, which is quite dire and from which the pandemic has in some ways been a temporary distraction, is the direct result of the extractivist model. I do not want to go into the statistics, as everyone will have seen these. However, there is no doubt the climate crisis is severe. This crisis is fundamentally a crisis of value: we are valuing the wrong things and we need to start valuing the things that will ensure our species’ survival. Otherwise, we are simply accelerating our own extinction.

More pragmatically, at this particular moment I think there are two elements in our response. The first echoes a long-standing and revered slogan in the feminist movement: naming the names. You call out your opponent, you call out your aggressor, you call out the people who are responsible for enabling subjugation, oppression and harassment. You describe and make explicit what is happening to you. Interpreters need to make explicit the ways in which the work they do is made invisible. The more remote interpreters become, the more they become part of this extractivist economic logic. They become part of the “ghost workers” (see Gray & Suri, 2019) of the contemporary economy.

Ghost workers are people who work remotely for increasingly lower wages and in increasingly poorer condition. Without them, the world economy would collapse. For example, if you use Amazon’s Alexa, there are thousands of low-paid workers in remote locations around the planet who are working often in extremely difficult conditions providing information to that device so that you can ask it to turn on your lights or to switch on your radio. There is this buried work, also called “click work.” Increasingly, this is what will happen to interpreters—and it is already happening to interpreters—they will become part of that ghostly workforce of click-workers around the planet. There are emerging movements now to combat labour and data extractivism, that is, the extraction of profit from translation labour, or from translations for which the translators get no further remuneration. So I think the first thing for interpreters is to collectively begin to resist, to call out these practices and describe them.3

Second, it seems to me that a fundamental ethical shift is required in how translators and interpreters view themselves. They have to be the embodied spokespersons of a different value system, a value system that is translingual, that is participative, that is mediatory, and that is thus fundamental to the construction of a different kind of world. There is no way that we can deal with the challenge of climate change if we don’t build communicative networks for that to happen. For that you need interpreters, translingual agents, who are particularly necessary because of course in what Naomi Klein (2014) calls the “sacrifice zones” of the modern economy, namely, in the zones where the most extraction of materials takes place, you classically have the poorest people on the planet who additionally speak the least spoken languages. So the whole question of indigenous
languages and interpreting with indigenous languages is fundamental. We absolutely need interpreters in all of these areas.

*It is really two things in combination though, isn’t it?* Conference interpreters and to a lesser extent also organised groups of community interpreters, through professional organisations for instance, have started naming things, calling things out, expressing an unease about the current situation. However, one of the things that from a broader ethical perspective have made me uneasy about this movement is that it is to some extent motivated by the survival of the profession for its own sake and the fight for better working conditions for interpreters. This is a noble cause to be defending but I feel that the value we provide to other people with our work and the voice of those who lack the access that many people in the interpreting world have, ought to play a greater role in this fight.

Indeed, and there is a parallel to be made here with movements of emancipation throughout history. The main argument in the movement for workers’ rights in the nineteenth century was that the realisation of these rights would lead to a greater flourishing of all human beings. It was not just about bringing greater safety to the workplace of coal miners or creating better conditions for typists, it was part of a larger project of human flourishing and emancipation. The classic argument of the women’s movement in the late twentieth century was that women’s rights were about a better, fairer, and safer world for everyone. Fighting for the rights of more than half of the world’s population makes for a better world for all inhabitants of the planet. So that’s why I absolutely think that it is crucial for any movement to improve conditions to be focused on the wider picture. Sometimes people dismiss that as utopian nonsense, but I think the thing to remember is that the real realists are the utopians. If you lived in the early nineteenth century and you thought that slavery was an evil to be eradicated, you stood against a multi-billion dollar industry that supported the cities of Bristol, Le Havre, Bordeaux, and many others. But the utopians, the dreamers, the idealists brought that about, and we always need this idealist and utopian dimension to our thinking. Ultimately, a society will only value a profession if that profession values its society.

*Professor Cronin, thank you so much for this interview.*

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Notes
1. For a more detailed analysis of the links between languages and state formation, see Blommaert (2009).
2. As is commonly the case in contemporary sociolinguistics, for instance, in Duchêne and Heller (2012).
3. Works that attempt to do this include Boéri (2014) and Piróth and Baker (2020)

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