

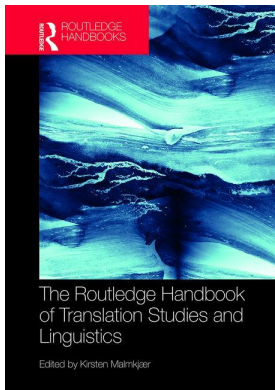
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### **Non-verbal communication and interpreting**

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# Non-verbal communication and interpreting

*Benoît Krémer and Claudia Mejía Quijano*

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## Introduction and historical perspectives

Non-verbal communication has been explored from standpoints so varied that Poyatos (2003) maintains that it is best studied using an interdisciplinary approach. Poyatos explicitly includes interpretation among the disciplines which would stand to benefit from research in this area, but non-verbal communication has received scant attention in the specialist interpretation literature, or, more accurately, it has been discussed from various different angles, in a fragmented fashion.

As many scholars note (Gile 1995; Ahrens 2004, 14–46; Diriker 2004, 7–25; Seeber 2015), interpreting research has undergone many developments in terms of both its main focus (description, prescription, teaching) and its methods (scientific studies, models, interdisciplinarity). Researchers have increasingly considered interpreting as an activity in context (Stenzl 1983; Pöchhacker 1994; Kalina 1998; Diriker 2004), and have therefore included non-verbal elements (prosody, intonation, situation) in their analyses. However, they have concentrated on these elements individually without integrating them into coherent acts of speech. We consider the act of speech that lies at the heart of the interpreting situation not as a simple juxtaposition or addition of discrete items that should be studied in isolation, but as parts of a whole which, as such, should be studied using an all-encompassing approach. This lack of theoretical coherence on the part of interpretation scholars is all the more surprising given that:

- (a) non-verbal communication is one of the elements that sets interpretation most clearly apart from translation; as Seleskovitch observes (1968, 50) with unwitting relevance to our discussion here, “the interpreter is in the presence of people, not texts” (we shall come back to this below);
- (b) since interpretation became a profession, interpreters themselves have stressed the importance of non-verbal aspects of communication for their work (Thiéry 1970, 1974);
- (c) there has been a fervent debate among professionals about the use of technology for remote sound and image transmission, where interpretation takes place largely in the absence of non-verbal elements (AIIC 2011; Mouzourakis 2006).

In this chapter, we identify the key functions of non-verbal aspects of communication for the purposes of both the work of interpreters and the theoretical advancement of the field. This will allow us to shed further light on the role played by non-verbal aspects of communication in interpreter training, as well as in changes in the interpreting profession.

## Interpretation as a transfer practice

The communication scenario with which we are concerned here exhibits a number of specific traits which set it apart from ordinary communication scenarios.

Firstly, the interpreter's role is unusual in that rather than merely listening to the speech, s/he is also its future co-sender (Thiéry 1970). Since the interpreter is not the original source of the meaning being conveyed (Prieto 1993; Chernov 2004), s/he must comprehend it and make it his/her own with a view to becoming the co-sender of this meaning in a language other than that of the original. This requires a level of comprehension which is much more thorough-going and exhaustive than that of a mere listener.

Secondly, the message is addressed to a (group of) listener(s) who, by definition, is equipped to understand the initial message only if the interpreter has performed his/her task to perfection. The interpreter carries out a *transfer practice* which is a crucial part of the communication (Mejía Quijano and Marmolejo 2010) and upon which the meaning shared between speaker and audience ultimately depends. This is the reason for our focus on the role, not of impromptu interpreters, but on professional interpreters who have the training and experience necessary to know how the profession works and where its pitfalls lie. We also look exclusively at simultaneous conference interpretation, though some of our findings are relevant to other types of interpretation.

Unlike listeners to a message being conveyed “directly”, without transfer from one language to another, the interpreter is not merely a receiver of that message. Rather, s/he is actively involved in appropriating it and reformulating it. Due to the complexity of these tasks, which is heightened by the near-simultaneous manner in which they are performed, the interpreter is dependent upon any element that may assist with them, including non-verbal communication – the role of which we shall now explore.

## Core issues and topics

### *Context of the interpretation scenario*

For any speaker, ideas are a kind of magma from which s/he extracts the meaning that s/he wishes to express. Once the speaker has arranged these ideas in the right order, s/he selects the words in which s/he intends to clothe them and utters them aloud; this utterance marks the beginning of an act of speech. In a monolingual scenario, the speaker addresses the listeners directly. In a multilingual one, the original speaker needs the interpreter's assistance in order to reach all of the listeners present. Strictly speaking, then, the interpreter is not a listener but a co-speaker who must appropriate the oral message in its entirety (Seleskovitch 1968), picking up on all the aspects of the speaker's message (nuances, intentions), comprehending the content of the discourse and the meaning behind the act of speech, and also remaining receptive to any (potentially relevant) indications (see below) which may be spontaneously produced.

To these ends, the interpreter actively decodes the speaker's message. In so doing, in addition to his/her training, experience and practice, s/he calls firstly upon any general knowledge relevant to what is being said:

- Specific preparation for the conference: research on the subject in hand, terminology and key issues
- Knowledge of the content and topic of the conference
- Knowledge of the cultural context of the conference

Secondly, the interpreter calls upon his/her knowledge of the participants and contextual information about them:

- The speaker: origin, education, speaking habits (accent, idiolect, voice, pace), communicative and pedagogical skills
- The speaker's intentions: to inform, to persuade, to provoke, to influence
- Who the interlocutors are: specialist or non-specialist audience, level of preparation
- The audience's expectations
- The interaction between speaker and audience: unilateral communication, dialogue, questions and answers, number of participants

Finally, the interpreter takes into account the specific circumstances in which the meeting is taking place:

- Overall setting (conference, symposium, presentation, interview) and purpose (dialogue, exchange, uni- or multidirectional communication)
- Location (atmosphere, historical buildings, protected sites)
- Time (date, period of historical significance, time of day)

This is so as not to lose sight of the ultimate goal (*skopos*, Vermeer 1989) of the communication in which the interpreter is involved: despite the intricacies of each individual speaker's argument, their overall contributions move along "lines" which are intended to lead somewhere (exchange of scientific or technical information, general agreement on a position or specific agreement on a text, trade or diplomatic negotiations, etc.).

These components form the backdrop for the interpreter's work, but they are not necessarily elements of non-verbal communication. They are the pre-existing circumstances of the interpretation scenario. Since they may shape meaning, however, they can sometimes give rise to the use of non-verbal elements of communication.

### *The interpretation process (1): From speaker to interpreter, or active comprehension*

During the act of interpreting, these pre-existing circumstances offer resources which the interpreter calls upon and applies to the utterance in context, combining his/her comprehension of the discourse with his/her assessment of the relevance of the codified or spontaneous non-verbal components which appear alongside it.

Naturally, the interpreter draws primarily on the part of the message consciously expressed by the speaker. This is made up of words, on the one hand, and all the other meanings conveyed by the speaker for the audience's discernment on the other: deliberate gestures

(particularly when these function as the non-linguistic equivalents of indexical words), deliberate facial expressions, moving around, images, diagrams or other supporting material for the speech, and so on. Such voluntary output is often sufficiently culturally coded for the speaker to be able to use it in support of the spoken words and rely on the listener's ability to understand it (Buysens 1943).

These elements have been expressly identified by those who generally underline the role of non-verbal communication in interpretation. However, most of the meanings conveyed by voluntary non-verbal elements very frequently prove superfluous in practice when compared with the verbal utterance itself (because the speaker reads diagrams out or explains images) or with the speaker's prosody (specific intonation for indexical words). This partly explains why they have tended not to be subject to a specific or more in-depth theoretical focus. As an example, Seleskovitch and Lederer (1986, 48) insist on "verbal context" ("*le contexte verbal*") and "cognitive context" ("*le contexte cognitif*") as playing a major part in the interpreter's comprehension process. Thiéry (1990, 43) identifies "situation analysis" as a useful tool for the interpreter, but limited to the "purpose of communication".

However, another part of the message is made up of indications within the act of speech which the speaker emits involuntarily. These come in many forms, but are often oral and acoustic, such as:

- Voice levels: volume may reveal stress; trembling may betray underlying emotions
- Tempo: an increase in the pace at which words are produced may, for example, allow the speaker to skip a controversial idea, or there may be a slowdown in the pace caused by hesitation over whether the words selected are the right ones
- Pronunciation: diction may become clearer in order to stress an important idea, or fatigue may lead to mumbling
- Coincidental noises: tongue or finger clicking in accordance with cultural habits, for instance

Such indications may also take on a visual or kinaesthetic form, such as:

- Spontaneous gestures: from micro-gestures, which are perceptible but discreet and betray suppressed emotion, to sweeping arm or body movements caused by irrepressible emotion
- Involuntary but culturally conditioned gestures: hands or fingers in a specific position or shape, usually appearing alongside a particular expression or state of mind
- Facial expressions: winking, frowning and other expressions which reveal the speaker's underlying mood, such as amusement, irony or disgust
- Deliberate glances towards a particular part of or person in the room while emphasising a specific idea or asking for corroboration from a particular individual

Lists of elements that may contribute to non-verbal communication, such as those offered by Poyatos (1985, 1986), suggest that there is an innumerable and perhaps even infinite array of these involuntary indications. Ferdinand de Saussure went so far as to assert that any object or occurrence perceptible to human beings may carry meaning:

*En me promenant, je fais sans rien dire une encoche sur un arbre, comme par plaisir. La personne qui m'accompagne garde l'idée de cette encoche, et il est incontestable*

*qu'elle associe deux ou trois idées à cette encoche dès ce moment, alors que je n'avais pas moi-même d'autre idée que de la mystifier ou de m'amuser. – Toute chose matérielle est déjà pour nous signe: c'est-à-dire impression que nous associons à d'autres, mais la chose matérielle paraît indispensable.* [While out walking, without saying a word, I make a notch in the bark of a tree, as if for my own amusement. My companion records the memory of the notch and, from that very moment, undeniably links one or two other ideas with that of the notch, when in fact my sole purpose was just to mystify this person or to entertain myself. For us, any material thing immediately constitutes a *sign*, that is to say an impression that we associate with other impressions, but it would seem that the material thing is crucial.]

(Saussure 1974, 40; tr. Peter Clayburn)

The interpreter has to sift through this infinite range of involuntary indications, judging how relevant each is to the comprehension of the speech. Scholars have tried to identify objective criteria upon which this selection process is based; one possibility is that certain indications display a spontaneous, innate and natural quality that allows them to steer the interpreter reliably through the deduction process (Poyatos 1987; Besson *et al.* 2005; Seeber 2012). However, some indications are commonly deemed natural while also being recognised as stemming from cultural habit. These include the volume of a speaker's voice: as a natural indication, this would suggest emotion on the part of the speaker, but the bounds of this parameter also depend on cultural habits in the speaker's community.

Here, as elsewhere, interpreters are obliged to work on a case-by-case basis. But in so doing, they are fortunate enough to benefit from the guidance of two powerful beacons.

### *Coherence and redundancy: The two guides in active comprehension*

The interpreter's task is not to imbibe these non-verbal elements in isolation and decide whether s/he should or should not interpret them for his/her audience (Poyatos 1987). Rather, interpreters must include whatever elements they deem pertinent to their overall comprehension in its entirety and thereby equip themselves to present that whole to the listener. As the interpretation scenario unfolds, one excellent guide to how relevant involuntary indications may be is their coherence, not only among themselves, but also with the voluntary information provided and, above all, with the pre-existing circumstances of the interpretation scenario. For instance, the likelihood that the index "muffled voice" will carry meaning is greater when it appears alongside the corresponding indications "speaker is emotional" and "account of tragic experiences" than when it is accompanied by the indications "speaker has a cold" and "microphone not working properly".

The interpreter must also beware of one of the foremost constants in communication, namely the redundancy of certain indications: a muffled voice may reveal nothing more than a hoarse speaker. One isolated indication is not enough to produce relevant meaning. As Chernov has it, the interpreter's anticipation is based on "the redundancy of discourse, both objective (linguistic) and subjective (extralinguistic) and the inferencing ability of the simultaneous interpreter" (Chernov 2004, 174).

Prosody performs a particular role in all of this due to its position at the halfway point between verbal elements (intonation, stress) and non-verbal ones (pace, volume, etc.): prosody often acts together with a gesture or a glance, and this sometimes leads efficiency-seeking interpreters to prioritise it as their only source of information, or even to deny themselves other inputs, by closing their eyes to concentrate solely on the speaker's voice and words. Interpreters

should exercise caution in this regard, however, for certain unexpected and meaningful effects, such as irony, may result from this linguistic “double act” by dint of the undermining of redundancy between prosody and gesture: some in the audience may be laughing at a gesture on the speaker’s part which was out of kilter with the explicit meaning of the speech, and if the interpreter misses this, s/he will be unable to include this information in his/her rendition.

The tool of redundancy requires skill. Interpreters cannot leave it completely aside, but nor can they depend on it wholly as a means of economising on work, for only the coherence of the information provided in its entirety reveals the true value of any redundancy in the speech. This coherence may allow the interpreter to “correct” the verbal speech being transmitted when this does not fulfil its communicative function but other functions which are key to the goal of the meeting. For instance, at one meeting, where the atmosphere was relaxed and the participants were agreeing on a particular point, a speaker (taking the floor in French, which was not his native tongue) smiled broadly while congratulating the French delegate who had taken the floor before him, saying, “*Je souscris à vos propos. Vous avez dit avant moi, mais moins bien que moi, ce que je voulais dire.*” [“I agree with you. You said what I wanted to say before I did, but *less well than I did.*”] The interpreter recognised the relevance of the indications showing her that the words actually spoken were an involuntary slip (the difficulty of double negatives and litotes for non-native speakers, a distaste for irony on the part of the speaker, and so on) and thus corrected the idea, taking into account the backdrop of the interpretation scenario and allowing the aim of the meeting to have the final say in her decision. This example shows not that the interpreter was unfaithful to the speaker’s intention but, on the contrary, that she paid heed to the overall intention, taking into account all the elements, including non-verbal elements, of the communication scenario.

Coherence between verbal aspects, non-verbal aspects and the circumstances of the interpretation scenario is thus pivotal in the specific interpretation processes of inference and anticipation.

### *The role of non-verbal communication in comprehending an act of speech*

These elements of non-verbal communication perform several functions. As in the case of the usual process of comprehension:

- They allow interpreters to understand the verbal elements. In all languages, words are polysemous: they never have one single meaning, but rather a number of potential meanings. Once a word is combined with other words in a sentence, it becomes less polysemous; the communication scenario in which a sentence appears further determines its meaning, but one or several non-verbal elements sometimes allow a final decision to be made as to what the overall utterance means by clarifying which of the word’s potential meanings is intended by the speaker. In a given act of speech, then, non-verbal elements are, first and foremost, necessary for accurately determining the meaning of elements of verbal communication.
- They allow interpreters to complete or nuance the information provided in the speaker’s verbal message by adding, for instance, the underlying intentions behind the communication. Language is also ruled by an economy principle: an act of speech always involves the sharing of the information conveyed by the means concurrently available. Considerable economy can be achieved by virtue of the simultaneous employment of several means of communication, and speakers do not deny themselves such opportunities.
- They allow the non-communicative function of words to be revealed when personal circumstances involuntarily interfere with the speech (slips, emotions).

- They allow interpreters to ensure that they have understood the verbal message by confirming its content or by adding corroborating elements to it.
- They allow interpreters to anticipate relevant pieces of information before they are unveiled in full or completely confirmed. Gestures are known to precede words by a few fractions of a second; a clenched fist may thus herald a vehement assertion, a faltering voice may introduce a moving idea and a furrowed brow may announce a worrying thought.

This last function is a necessary part of the interpreter's message: in addition to his/her linguistic and grammatical anticipation of the speaker's message, the interpreter uses all available indications (including visual and kinaesthetic ones) to predict the direction in which the speech will proceed. This advance "information" is of considerable help to interpreters in preparing their strategic moves; their task is to ascertain (a) whether these indications are relevant to the meaning of the message, for which they rely on the overall coherence; (b) whether they will make the information gathered explicit in their version; and (c) if so, by what means.

### *The interpretation process (2): From comprehension to production, or transfer*

Anticipation is crucial because it affords the interpreter enough time to transfer the semantic content of the original into another language. It can be assumed that this process is possible because all relevant information is synthesised at a functional level less abstract than that of language and closer to individual and sensory experience, which makes it less cumbersome and more reliable.

In the process of drawing as close as possible to the meaning of the speaker's message, the interpreter takes advantage of anything which may allow him/her to construct a specific type of mental image (Chernov 2004) which is to an extent detached from the words of any specific language (Kr mer 2013, 2016).

These mental images, which interpreters use as the basic tool for the transfer process, are not photographs, mirrors or reflections of a given thing. They have meaning, but are not precise, established icons or symbols in a particular culture. Firstly, they are completely personal to interpreters themselves in each individual scenario: they allow a speech to elicit images linked to their own experience. For that speech, the images will take on a meaning at that point in time and in light of the circumstances of that scenario. The function of the non-verbal elements is to help create these mental images in the interpreter's mind; to the "direct" information provided by words and phrases, non-verbal elements add more "contextual" information which brings the situation being reported coherently to life. The message as assembled by the interpreter is thus no longer only a linear sequence of words to be translated, but rather a set of three-dimensional situations which can almost be visualised.

Such images have a certain semantic depth: they are a reduction of all the information gleaned in the comprehension phase, a kind of staging of the message akin to that of the poet recounting real-life experiences:

When gathering legends, a poet collects for a particular scene only the *props* in the strictly theatrical sense of the term; once the actors have exited the stage, a particular object remains – a flower on the floor, perhaps – which lingers in one's memory and shows more or less what has occurred.

(Saussure 1986, 220)



The most intense form of non-verbal communication is painting, where the lack of words and a third dimension does not prevent an event from being recounted, as in the work by Chardin in Figure 5.1, for instance. The name of the painting is “Boy with a spinning top”. Bolens (2013) analyses it as follows: the image depicts a child in contemporary attire; before him is a flat surface upon which we see an object, and in the background appear a quill, some paper and a book. We see that the child’s gaze is set upon the object in question: a spinning top. But we also know that the top is constantly moving, because it has not yet fallen over. Similarly, we know that the child is the one who spun the top in the first place because his right hand is still in a very specific position: the ends of his fingers are pressed together, having only a moment ago clasped the top of the toy and set it in motion. By portraying all of this so precisely, the painting allows our comprehension to go beyond what is actually depicted: from the objects in the background (books and writing implements), we can deduce that the child was supposed to be studying, but was more interested in playing. These conclusions are brought to us by our own experience. They are not expressly “stated” in the painting; we draw upon the knowledge we have acquired elsewhere to instill a meaning in the scene before us. That meaning may range from the thoroughly superficial (the depiction of a moment in the life of a child) to the thoroughly profound (a warning against the dangers of idleness).

For transfer to succeed, the interpreter will let his/her imagination summon to the surface similar images evoked by the speech. Unlike paintings, however, these images are not static: with each new idea, the image will be corrected, altered or perhaps completely reworked.



Figure 5.1 *Boy with a spinning top* by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. Photo © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Angèle Dequier. Reproduced with permission

In this sense, there is a clear link between this process on the part of the interpreter and the oneiric activity: in dreams, we experience mental images which are constantly evolving, with characters who undergo transformations and situations which change without the described reality's losing its relevance. The phenomenon undergone by the interpreter listening attentively to a speech is similar to this except that, unlike the sleeper who forgets these images on emerging from slumber, the interpreter constructs this silent scene with the purpose of telling the story more deftly.

This honing of mental images, which the interpreter performs at a more sensory and almost latent level of conscious activity, allows transfer to take place more quickly. Listening and re-expressing content are complex and highly abstract mental processes so it is clearly economically profitable to call upon a more automatic type of cerebral function to assist with the transfer process. However, in terms of their role in communication, we might also compare these moving mental images with the magma of thought mentioned above (that is to say, the starting point which is in fact a prerequisite for any act of speech): one must be able to conceive initially what one wants to say before one can say it (Prieto 1975) and interpreters' mental images combine their comprehension of the speaker's message with their own experience and memorial record of reality, constructing the speaker's meaning on the basis of their own sensory experience. They can therefore conceive of the meaning to be transferred non-linguistically and thereby "take the floor" as an individual wishing to put a meaning into words, striving to ascribe linguistic form to their communicative intention, rather than as mere messengers parroting someone else's words.

The desire to adopt the role of co-speaker makes the interpreter a fully fledged contributor to the communication scenario by giving him/her the status of "participant" rather than a third party external to the act of speech. Only when s/he becomes a true co-sender of the message can s/he really address the audience in this other language which s/he shares with them. The interpreter's speech, now freed from the linguistic clothing in which it was received, benefits from the fluency which comes with spontaneity, and can easily leave room for creativity, which makes the task of speech production less burdensome and more pleasant for the interpreter.

Because non-verbal elements are more sensory and less abstract than verbal content and form a coherent whole, they are a crucial tool for the interpreter at this point in the transfer process.

### *The interpretation process (3): Co-sending*

The interpreter is now equipped with the specific content to be re-expressed, which is in his or her mind in the form of images; this content is tantamount to what the speaker wanted to say. The interpreter can now turn to producing the speech in another language.

Even at this stage, however, non-verbal communication has an important role to play. Though barely, if at all, visible to their audience, interpreters do not deliver their speeches like emotionless robots; over the course of their work, they too become responsible for sending the message. For this reason, albeit in the artificial surroundings of a simultaneous interpretation booth and with no one there to witness it directly, they recreate a complete act of speech. This means that they do not limit themselves to verbal elements, but include non-verbal elements of communication. Changes in voice and prosody and physical movements and gestures, be they conscious or subconscious, can be observed at this stage because the interpreter is addressing the audience as a co-sender of the message.

We might assume non-verbal communication to be superfluous here, given that no one is able to witness the corresponding indications and the only link between the interpreter and the

listeners is the sound of the interpreter's voice transmitted through the technical equipment (microphone, wires and earpieces). But this assumption overlooks, firstly, the role which non-verbal communication plays at this stage in the interpreter's own sense of conviction. Meaning is elusive, and interpreters must convince themselves before they can convince others. To achieve this, they must listen to and remain in control of the speeches they produce. The purpose of this is to monitor their language for formal accuracy and to ensure that the content they are expressing (a) tallies with the message as they have understood it and (b) forms a coherent whole, both as an idea in isolation and as one idea in a sequence of ideas.

Secondly, as we observed above, redundancy is a constant feature of communication, and within the interpreting booth, a furious hand gesture is inseparable from the agitated prosody of the spoken word which conveys the irritation discerned in the speaker. No speech is truly comprehensible without the prosodic features corresponding to the meaning being conveyed, and all prosodic features come with their own gestures in a kind of communicative synaesthesia. Interpreters' voices are a unique combination of verbal and non-verbal traits, and their art involves using these traits in order to perform their role as co-senders and co-speakers. Non-verbal communication is their most useful accomplice in this task: the best way to try to convince an audience is by using tone, hesitation and suspense, controlling breathing, uttering some phrases more quickly and others more slowly, conveying a note of interrogation and including moments of silence.

In addition, because of the need for communicative synaesthesia, if interpreters exhibit a lack of non-verbal communication in the booth, their prosody becomes monotonous. This makes it seem to the listener that the interpreter is not addressing his or her speech to anyone in particular, akin to a speaker reading a "written" text aloud without having familiarised him- or herself with it first. The fact that the audience cannot see the interpreter's gestures and expressions does not mean that the interpreter is not addressing that audience in the usual way. Communication is usually established when a speech is addressed to a listener; when the listening is being done in a language other than the speaker's, the recipient is left in no doubt that the message is not being addressed directly to him or her if the prosody is that of a robot, and there is a chance that the listener will stop focusing on the speaker's message and give up his or her role as a recipient of it. It is therefore preferable for interpreters to accept the audience's surprise at their "antics" in the booth rather than run the risk of failing to achieve their foremost task.

The non-verbal communication of the listeners themselves is no less important for the interpreter at this stage in the process of co-sending: if, for instance, certain members of the audience nod, show signs of satisfaction or appear to be convinced while listening to the interpretation, this shows the interpreter that s/he has established a line of communication between the participants. In addition, by looking at the listeners, the interpreter can assess whether they have understood the speech. Finally, if the same non-verbal signals are coming from the entire audience, the interpreter has successfully conveyed the speaker's message. Non-verbal elements thus allow both the speaker and the interpreter to monitor the listeners' comprehension of the message and to correct, nuance and improve this if need be.

## Current debates

### *The role of non-verbal communication in theorising and teaching interpretation as opposed to translation*

In order to convey a speaker's message to an audience after having re-expressed it in a different language, the interpreter requires a thorough understanding of the initial message.

The same is true of translators, but for them the entire message is contained in the text being translated; all relevant information is to be found there, for otherwise the reader would be unable to reconstitute the message. A text is thus a canvas of words, but made up of language-bound discourse interwoven with non-verbal elements of the act of speech which may be made explicit using equivalent words or inserted in the text by other means (punctuation, syntax or layout, for example).

Poyatos (1994) partly developed his theory of non-verbal communication on the basis of literary characterisation (see, for instance, his 1994 work on *Don Quixote*). Similarly, a new wave of literary analysis is focusing on the existence of non-verbal, and especially kinaesthetic, elements in literary texts (Bolens 2008, 2013); this highlights authors' skill in including these elements of the reality being described. Rather surprisingly, then, non-verbal communication has been studied using essentially "linguistic" texts!

In interpretation, all elements of the message are delivered at the moment when the act of communication takes place and as a coherent whole. Actual words are only one part of this, and are inserted into the broader mass of non-verbal elements of communication. This explains why depictions of the interpretation profession have always involved throwing into relief certain non-verbal elements which feature in the interpretation scenario. Both in photos of interpreters at Nuremberg and in the celebrated Egyptian bas-relief, Horemheb and the Syrians/Nubians (see Figure 5.2), hand gestures and bodily posture need no assistance in informing the spectator of the interpretation scenario being portrayed. Yet, there is a lack of scholarly work on and theoretical coherence around non-verbal communication in interpreting, as though this were an optional addition to the theory of interpretation. Seleskovitch and Lederer, for instance, underscore the importance of what we above term the pre-existing circumstances of the interpretation scenario, but those circumstances are somewhat confused with non-verbal elements in the strictest sense, voluntary or otherwise, under the umbrella of "verbal interaction":

If the interpreting booth does not look out over the room, the interpreters must at least have some kind of view of it. The reasons for this are clear; the same prerequisites apply to all verbal interactions. In order to do their work properly, interpreters need not only to see the person speaking (this is frequently observed and widely understood); it is equally pivotal for them to see the person or people whom they themselves are addressing. The close-up view of the speaker provided by a screen is undoubtedly often superior in every respect to a direct view of the room, for facial expressions, movements and gestures are clearly perceptible in it. This is of undeniably significant assistance in elucidating the meaning of the speaker's words.

(Seleskovitch and Lederer 2002, 363)

Perhaps it is only with new technologies spurring major changes in the way in which some speakers prepare their speeches (PowerPoints, images and audio and video recordings) and new findings on non-verbal communication in general coming to light, that the need to uncover these non-verbal elements is becoming clear.

In any case, it is crucial to stress the distinction between theorisation in Translation Studies and in Interpretation Studies, and the differing roles which non-verbal communication plays in each of these. Unless work on interpretation takes into account the reality of the act of speech as a coherent, composite whole which includes elements of non-verbal communication in a simultaneous syntactic system, such scholarship will run the risk of becoming a study of translation, with its linear syntax. This will obstruct the path to research focusing on the theory of interpretation proper, and it will skew the work done on translation.



Figure 5.2 Ancient Egypt: Horemheb and the Syrians/Nubians (with the interpreter on the left)  
Source: National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden.

### Future directions

We have thus far adopted the term “non-verbal communication” to refer to the phenomenon being studied here. Having completed our discussion of the various functions which this performs in interpretation, however, we should consider this expression in the particular context of the field of interpretation.

Firstly, the label suffers the major disadvantage of being negative: *non-verbal* communication refers to all elements of the act of communication which do not involve oral expression of words or phrases. This paves the way for a number of different effects: one may include sociolinguistic aspects, visual or kinaesthetic considerations, or psychological and even neurological factors. These aspects are often merely listed without clear explanation, however, which makes the task of determining what they are supposed to cover difficult; each author includes whichever components s/he sees fit, according to his/her own custom, which leads to misunderstandings. Nor does this negated form allow a distinction to be made between the circumstances of the interpretation scenario and non-verbal elements in the stricter sense; this conflation of factors prevents the phenomenon from being accurately studied and, to an even greater extent, practice and teaching from being brought more into step with the findings.

The second drawback of the term “non-verbal communication” is that it includes the notion of “verbal”, which refers to the fact that the message requires words, and that those words are uttered *orally*. We cannot restrict the notion of “verbal” to purely acoustic output, however, for the idea of “non-verbal” is also partly linked to prosody. Prosody does comprise non-linguistic features (geographically marked accents, emotions, pace, etc.) as well as linguistic ones (distinctive accents, intonation marking syntax). Prosody may

thus be deemed at once “verbal” and “non-verbal”, which means that it is as impossible to account for it in non-verbal communication as it is to omit it! In sum, the scope of the term “verbal” does not map onto the field of interpretation, and always roots theoretical work in predominantly “linguistic” concerns.

This leaves the term “communication”, which is ambiguous here at the very least. Does “non-verbal communication” mean communicating without any recourse to words? If this is the case, the only true case of non-verbal communication is that which the deaf practise on a daily basis when they use various sign languages. While our focus here has not been on the “verbal”, it goes without saying that we at no point considered examining communication in which no words were involved. To be more precise, then, “non-verbal communication” refers not to a type of “communication” but to the “non-linguistic” components of communication in general.

In this chapter, we have striven to focus upon the role played in simultaneous conference interpretation by a series of elements which, while distinct from linguistic aspects, are no less pivotal in communication. They may potentially appear against the backdrop of the interpretation scenario and its particular circumstances, ranging from the way in which words are uttered to the elements or features which are indeed present via all that a given speaker produces. But they only ever include features which carry meaning for the speaker. In other words, these are devices through which speakers deliberately, though not always consciously, manifest their ideas in a form perceptible to others.

Rather than their properties (acoustic, visual, kinaesthetic, objective, etc.), it is the fact that these features play a semantic role in the act of communication that makes them part of it. Their meaning may be pre-established, in the case of culturally coded items, or forged in the act when discourse converges with other elements, making them similar to indications. They are meaningful signs or interpretable indications which we can now term semiological, to give them a positive label in accordance with the tenets of Saussure’s “semiology”, a discipline which focuses on precisely these “non-verbal” elements (Buysens 1943; Barthes 1964; Prieto 1975, 1991, 1993; Saussure 1957, 1974, 1986, 2006).

These semiological elements are key for interpreters because as co-senders of the message they require an active understanding of the speech through which they can furnish themselves with a “mental staging” of the message. This allows them to use a parallel act of speech to recreate their own version of the speech in another language. Without these semiological elements, the act of speech is incomplete, and the amount of information available to interpreters for comprehending the speaker’s message fully and assuming their role as true co-speakers is subsequently reduced.

## Implications for practice

### *Semiological elements and current developments in the interpreting profession*

Recent technical developments allowing interpreters not to work in the meeting room, that is to say the setting in which the communication between speaker and audience is taking place, but to follow the debate remotely (see Mouzourakis 2006, 46) pose a problem where the interpreter’s task is concerned.

Besides fatigue, which surfaces more quickly in such conditions (Moser-Mercer 2005) because less information is available to the interpreter, meaning that semantic uncertainty increases and the interpreter’s task is more arduous, interpreters find themselves confronted with a fragmented view of the communication scenario. The screen conveying the image to the interpreters shows only part of what is going on in the room (speaker’s face, PowerPoint

slides), and not necessarily other elements which might feed into their perception of the overall act of speech (audience reactions, extraneous events, sufficient close-up of the podium). Interpreters are dependent upon the producers' or camera technicians' decisions, which are informed by those individuals' own objectives, as well as on the speed of their reactions when something which may lead the interpreters to require a different view occurs.

Only when the full importance of the act of speech, taken as an inseparable whole which combines semiological and linguistic elements, has been recognised will it be possible to draw conclusions about research on Interpretation Studies and about the conditions in which remote interpreting can be carried out.

We must also assess the psychological processes in play where the personality of the interpreter is concerned: the need to identify with first the speaker and then the audience engenders a sense of insecurity which triggers natural defence mechanisms. The most powerful of these is splitting, where the interpreter sees the various tasks which s/he is being asked to carry out not as a single whole but as a succession of separate operations, some of which s/he prioritises over others. In order to move beyond this fragmented approach, the mental images which form interpreters' real-life experiences reconstitute their own identity and, by allowing them to overcome the fragmentation, enable them to bask in the glory of the job (well done).

Finally, before a specific pedagogy of interpretation will be able to hone new teaching methods it is necessary to gain a more thorough understanding of (a) the semiological work behind the interpreter's selection of which content, out of all the voluntary signs and involuntary indications available, to retain to convey the message; (b) the role of coherence and redundancy between semiological and linguistic elements; and (c) the formation of the interpreter's mental staging of the message. These would ensure transfer of the highest quality and offer tools tailored to the different types of interpretation, the number of which is increasing. With audiovisual technologies becoming ever more present in daily life and work in our societies, and given the fragmentation of the interpreter's work to which this can give rise, those tools cannot come soon enough.

### Further reading

Eco, U. 1977. *A Theory of Semiotics*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan.

A general introduction to semiotics, which discusses signs and codes and is particularly interesting in its approaches of cultural influences, disambiguation, undercoding and overcoding.

Feyereisen, P. and de Lannoy, J.-D. 1991. *Gestures and Speech: Psychological Investigations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book gives a general approach of the role of gestures in speech and communication, including an analysis of "body language". Chapter 3 ("Autonomy of gestures and speech") analyses gestural cues to emotion, the interaction between verbal and non-verbal communication and the interpretation of discrepant messages.

Wadensjö, C. 1998. *Interpreting as Interaction*. London and New York: Longman.

Presents context, objectives and roles of the participants in interpreting interaction with a view to making sense of the utterances in a communicative and social perspective.

### Related topics

Semiotics and translation.

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