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Language Difficulties in the Eyes of Polish Teenage Brokers Living in the UK

Abstract: The paper presents a short history of translation theories of the 20th century and the roles of community interpreters. It also discusses the concepts of non-professional translations (brokering), with particular attention paid to difficulties that Polish teenage brokers face in the UK regarding the processes of translation and interpretation as evidenced in the 2016–2018 study on 55 Polish bilinguals. It focuses on selected settings that child brokers enumerated in the interviews, to show that all the participants undertake the task on a daily basis, and their language assistance tends to be provided in particularly linguistically challenging contexts (i.e. medical, legal or financial) which per se put additional burden on the young bilinguals. Finally, the study sheds light on the possible impact that lack of knowledge of specialized vocabulary and translation/interpretation skills might have on the personality of the young mediators.

Key words: language brokering, bilingual, non-professional translation, context

Introduction

The definition of translation, according to Kelly (2005), perceives this act as the skill of understanding the source text and delivering it to a reader in the target language by applying the register, the background knowledge, and other language resources according to the intended aim. We can draw a general conclusion that the task of the translator (equipped with specific, desired knowledge, experience and techniques) is to convey the message while maintaining the author's intent, register and style. Interpretation, however, is often viewed as a seemingly less demanding process, and as Tseng (2000) points out there is a common misconception regarding interpreting, viewing it as "an effortless activity that can be done by any bilinguals". He explains that interpreters are frequently perceived as "machines that do code-switching automatically from one language to another", and concludes that "only when clients have no clue on which to base their evaluation of the interpretation can interpretation evoke any sense of awe among clients. This is detrimental to professionalization" (Tseng, 2000, pp. 465–476). The questions posed in the paper are: "What, if this task of translating/interpreting is being undertaken by a non-professional, i.e. a bilingual teenager, who does possess natural, inborn translation abilities, though has not been trained as a professional, and to make matters more strenuous and complex, is trying to help their parents in cross-cultural communication? What impact can it possibly have on their personality and relationships within the families?" The study carried out by the author shows that this is a prevailing practice in many Polish families living in the UK, where children become language brokers within their communities and take on the role of community translator/interpreter¹, irrespective of their age, linguistic abilities, knowledge, life experience, complexity of the task, severity of possible mistakes, and in turn consequences. The paper discusses merely an

excerpt from the study and a more comprehensive view will be shown in the next articles¹.

Selected translation theories - a brief summary of literature findings

The twentieth century brought about a number of translation theories and approaches. To Bensoussan (1990) translation is closely related to the reading process and Picken (1989), perceives it as a method of decoding oral and written messages (from writing to speech or vice versa) from one language to another. Hatim and Mason (1990), mention the significance of negotiation of meaning between the speaker and receiver, while Larson (1984), underlines the importance of delivering the same message. She points out that both parties or speakers (through an intermediary or a written text) must comprehend the same meaning, preserving the pace of the original source language text. She points out that the goal of a translator should be to produce a new text that would maintain the same meaning as the original, yet still sound natural to the receiver (thanks to the appropriate register, for example). Similar opinion is expressed by Bell (1991), who explains that translation is merely the replacement of a text in one language with an equivalent text in another. Similar views are presented by Newmark (1981), who states that translation encompasses elements of science, art and a craft. The job of the craftsman, he claims, is to replace a message and/or statement in one language by the similar one in another. Having assessed the facts and used the appropriate language (scientific element); the artist has to be creative and able to differentiate good writing from bad one using their intuition. The final product of the skillful translator is to be a well-designed, yet close to the

1. When considering the definition of a language broker, both terms (translator and interpreter) are used interchangeably.

original text. In practice, as translators differ in taste and vocabulary and/or techniques choice, the outcome, Newmark says is (1981) unique, and contains characteristic features of the particular person, the more when done orally, and performed ad hoc.

Translators/interpreters and their role in community translating/interpreting

Hale (2008, 101–119), presents five interpreter roles that have either been “openly prescribed” or “deduced” from the performance of interpreters. She describes the first one as similar to that of an advocate, who often represents the minority language speaker. The second, she claims provides services to an office or institution and the third, supervises the flow of information, i.e. between a lawyer and a defendant. Finally, Hale (2008) says that interpreters take responsibility for the smooth flow of communication and consequently the failure or success of the interaction, and faithfully deliver the messages to the receiver. Depending on the task assigned, circumstances, time frame and other factors, interpreters adopt the role most appropriate from their perspective. She maintains that the higher their interpreting skills, and the better their working conditions are, the more chances the interpreters have of translating accurately (Hale, 2018). However, only few of the aforesaid elements are present in the case of community translation/interpretation² or brokering – the representation of the client and responsibility of the interpreter for the success of interaction. As for the conditions of the mediations undertaken, these are often governed by the sheer need of interpreting and the non-professionals have no awareness of the roles they would

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2. Here community translation and interpretation is used interchangeably as both professional translators and brokers often provide oral and written services at the same time.

need to adopt. Surely, their main concern is to preserve the accuracy of the meaning conveyed, simply for fear of being misunderstood or the possible negative consequences of their inexperience which could lead to misinterpretation. In difficult language settings (i.e. parent-teacher meetings, doctor's or legal/financial advisor's appointments, police encounters) brokers tend to get anxious and frustrated that they may fail. According to Hale (2007) other often discussed and quoted types of oral translation are dialogue interpreting, informal 'liaison' interpreting³, cultural interpreting, escort interpreting or ad hoc interpreting. What is more, Pöchhacker, (2000) claims that community/public service/liaison, interpreting is sometimes referred to by its particular setting, thus it can be referred as i.e. healthcare interpreting (or medical interpreting, or hospital interpreting), legal interpreting (or court interpreting or police interpreting), social interpreting. Kościałkowska-Okońska (2010) is one of the scholars who states that court interpreting is sometimes regarded as a distinct field with different role perceptions and expectations of the participants. Naturally the parties engaged in official community translation/interpretation are adults, yet it is children who tend to participate in pre-interrogations, hearings or court procedures. Among other more prevailing situations that child brokers find themselves in are: driver's license tests, school interactions, GP's or hospital appointments, dietician-client consultations, job interviews, or social worker-client encounters (Kościałkowska-Okońska, 2010).

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3. Liaison interpreting is the most informal form of interpreting, typically performed during visits of delegations or at small business meetings. The interpreter accompanies the whole group or the person in question and interprets whenever required. It is also the most similar in terms of mode of interaction/modality to language brokering.

Child language brokering as an example of community interpreting

All the aforementioned are present in child language brokering (the place, participants and modality⁴), however, there seem to be at least three major differences which can have a significant impact on the quality of the translation, the interpreter's well-being/self and relations with the participant who is assisted. The first and most essential difference is the person who provides the language services – the child. Their lack of professional translation/interpretation skills and/or professional/specific/technical vocabulary required in the particular, context-specific situation, is of key importance in language mediations⁵. Additionally, the fact that it is often the parent, whose language skills are insufficient to hold the conversation alone and requires the assistance of the child may lead to a role-conversion. Children brokers tend to take over the responsibility for the severity of the situation and success of the linguistic exchange, often stress-triggering. Next, as these brokers are children, they are still unfamiliar with the intricacies of the adult world, lack experience in certain situations (bank, law, medicine) and often do not know how to conduct themselves in these situations. Moreover, despite being able to comprehend the language (they understand the general meaning of what is being said), the interpretation of the message is beyond their cognitive abilities. Being bilingual does not mean they possess the same vocabulary repertoire in both language systems, or share the same social experience (i.e. they had not seen an official letter from a Polish bank nor been to a doctor or legal advisor in Poland) This can lead to confusion, self-consciousness, and additionally, lower quality of the message conveyed.

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4. By modality we shall understand the way interpreting is undertaken. Language brokering is done by a child who wants to help their client (most frequently a parent) in the linguistically challenging interaction with a third party, either in a face-to-face oral exchange or/and while translating a written message, i.e. a formal letter.

5. In literature the term 'language brokering' tends to be used interchangeably with the term 'language mediations'.

In the study on Polish brokers carried by the author it was confirmed that domestic-related situations (i.e. translating text messages, during friends or neighbours' visits, while watching a film, etc.) were among the very few that children brokered in, and the prevailing ones were the aforementioned formal settings (Żytowicz, 2017). Finally, the stress of being exposed to a delicate situation per se may additionally suppress the child's performance, i.e. when a broker is expected to assist an ill or disturbed parent in a hospital, meeting with a teacher, clerk or a legal advisor. In these contexts the young brokers can feel anxious, embarrassed and stressed. Though, according to the report launched by the *2020health* organization in 2013, the government of the United Kingdom spends nearly 23 million pounds on public-service/community interpreting in health settings annually, still it is young brokers who are heavily relied on when interpreting is needed *ad hoc*.

The study - brokering and difficulties

Altogether 55 Polish bilinguals aged 8–18, living in the United Kingdom, and undertaking language mediations for third parties (in vast majority for their parents) were interviewed. All the interviews were semi-structured⁶, face-to-face, video-recorded and carried out either in focus groups⁷ or individually. To ensure the validity of the research,

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6. Semi-structured interviews are characterised by topic guides containing major questions that are used in the same way in every interview, although the sequence of the questions might vary as well as the level of probing for information by the interviewer.

7. The main purpose of focus group research is to evoke a level of respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions otherwise not available when using methods, such as observation or individual interviewing. Grouping additionally aims at triggering all the participants to join in the discussion, having heard others' experiences. In this research grouping respondents was necessary due to time constraints, as their parents expressed their consent for 1h interviews only, to be done after the school hours. Given that, to talk to everyone the author would need two months.

maximum comfort of the respondents, secrecy and confidentiality, all the interviews were carried out using the same procedure and following the rules (i.e. ensuring a safe place, allocating time frame, preserving the same method of recording and manner of posing questions) described by John W. Creswell (2014) and Earl R. Babbie (2007). The interviewees answered a number of pre-designed questions, among others those regarding brokering situations and translation difficulties encountered. The choice of the language of the interview depended on the respondents as at the beginning of the conversation the interviewer would ask in Polish and English which one they would prefer. Additionally, the study found no correlation between the age of the respondent, length of stay in Britain or age of onset/language immersion, so it was impossible to state that those who had lived there longer found themselves more comfortable in English.

The analysis of the interviews revealed that one of the most prevailing and at the same time challenging brokering contexts (out of 20 different settings provided) was medical, with 20 examples of brokering during appointments with a doctor and 7 in hospitals, followed by formal letters (19 examples), at the bank interpreting (12 examples) and police encounters or lawyer meetings (4 each). It also confirmed that while all the respondents would comprehend the message which was to be translated from English into Polish, they would predominantly struggle with finding the equivalent vocabulary in the latter language. It cannot be attributed only to higher proficiency in English as also those respondents who had stayed in the UK for merely two years gave similar accounts. The author believes that no prior experience in a particular situation (reading a legal letter or talking to a doctor about the specific disease) and as a result lack of vocabulary (in books, films or other media) in Polish is to be responsible for the differences between the linguistic aptitude in the two languages of the bilingual

brokers. Some children also suggested that apart from not knowing the equivalents of the words choosing proper syntax often turned out to be a true challenge. Also, when asked about any translation/interpretation techniques used or what they do if they do not know what or how to say something, they were confused and unable to provide examples. When looking for possible solutions which might facilitate translation/interpretation, the brokers admitted that facing difficulties, they would simply look for help in 'Google translate', simplify or omit problematic phrases, and try to explain the meaning with other words, adapting the difficult vocabulary item or making it sound more 'Polish'. The excerpts below are just a few examples of difficulties Polish brokers encounter (INT stands for the interviewer, while the initials represent the coded name of a particular respondent):

Dcsf2018

INT: So what makes translating difficult: words, grammar structures or the whole syntax?

D: I think that just words.

K: I think that putting it all together in a sentence is a bit weird, different.

D: In my opinion it's not. It's more words as sometimes I don't know what they mean.

Dscn 0008

INT: Let's go back to brokering, please. If you don't understand something than what do you do?

Sz: I would say that if I don't understand a word I check it on the Internet or ask a teacher in English what it means and she explains it to me.

G: I mostly ask my friends and yes, check on the Internet.

INT: And if you are brokering and there is no Internet access, then what?

Sz: **Sometimes there is a problem, that when I have to translate something into Polish I don't know how to say it.**

INT: You don't know the vocabulary?

Sz: Yes and then **I am trying to explain it, what the word means in Polish. But sometimes I can't manage to.**

G: **I get stuck and then I think hard for 5 minutes and I recall it.**

Dscn006

A: **The thing is that I understand these letters in English but it seems to me they are different in English, they mean something else.. it's like... I kind of think in a different way when something is in Polish or in English. I think it's easier for me if it's in English.**

INT: More natural?

A: **It comes more natural in English. Whereas in Polish, I have focus more on what I am writing, well... to make it right.** And to be honest I have a problem with that.

Dscf2025

INT: Listen what makes these translations difficult? Vocabulary or grammar? Is it hard to broker?

We: I was to help my step-father when he had to fill in some online questionnaire and he didn't understand everything. **So it was hard for me to find the right words in Polish as there were a lot of English words that were long and I don't know them, I mean I don't know their meaning in Polish.**

INT: So it was vocabulary?

We: Yes

D: In my case it was similar.

INT: Vocabulary? And for you Ewa? [she only nodded yes]

INT: *Have you ever translated a very complicated sentence? Is grammar difficult for you or easy? Can you understand it from the context?*

Si: **Usually there are some words that I know in English but I cannot translate them into Polish so at that moment I reach for the Internet.**

Dscn1949

INT: *Ok, what about feelings? How do you feel when you translate? Try to tell me.*

Pat: **Bored. I don't like translating. It's hard for me because I understand the English but when I try to translate it in Polish it's not quite right.**

So my mum just uses Google Translate almost all the time.

Wic: *I am used to it. I am used to it. Every time, every single day.*

INT: *Every single day...?*

Wic: *Not every single day cause my dad never goes outside the house because he has to look after our two dogs but if he does... I am doing it mainly for them. I mean... when he first time like here he didn't know how to speak English. I learnt how to speak English in six or five months... Then I was like, then I helped my dad speaking and I'd teach my dad and I would sometimes teach my dad.*

INT: *So you're used to it.*

Wic: *Yeah...*

INT: *Are you proud?*

Wic: *Shaking his head - half side yes, half side... no*

Paulina: **Sometimes I am just nervous, I don't know if I am gonna translate it right.**

INT: *So nervous...*

Aleksandra: **Like confused... because sometimes I don't know how to say a word in Polish.**

Patryk: **Yes, sometimes it's challenging because there might be like a long paragraph that I have to translate and then there might be like.. all of the words might be hard and I might not know them and I just get stuck... [...]**

Having analyzed the few examples of the accounts given by the young Polish brokers in the interviews it can be noticed that language mediations come to them naturally, yet not effortlessly, as they underline the fact of not feeling nervous while translating if the topic seems familiar. Despite the negative emotions mentioned in the interviews, these young brokers do not view brokering as a negative experience (which has been confirmed by the aforementioned studies). These excerpts also show that the major hardship children face is finding the appropriate terms (equivalents) which would ensure a good quality of translation, and in turn possible parental approval. They admit that they understand the message, however, due to lack of vocabulary and the complex structures which have to be handled, feel apprehensive and unable to manage the job at the standard expected by their parents. This triggers stress and other negative emotions to be discussed in detail in the next papers. When they are assigned an easier task of translating text messages or brokering in a shop, for peers at school or while assisting their parents with their language learning, they tend to recall positive emotions such as pride, and happiness to be able to help.

Conclusions

The paper presented a short review and analysis of the history of translation theories of the 20th century, and in brief mentioned such aspects as the services provided by non-professional, community translators and children-brokers, with regards to the notions of interpretation and translation skills and role of professional vs. non-professional translators/interpreters, and child brokers play in a community. Finally, it also showed the possible relations between them and their clients (in the study predominantly the parent), in particular focusing on the stress encountered while brokering. The paper is based on the accounts given

by Polish bilingual brokers in interviews (the study carried out by the author in the years 2016-2018). By addressing the role of teenage language brokers as examples of non-professional, community interpreters, and showing the examples of the phenomenon in challenging linguistic settings (i.e. medical, legal, financial) the possible detrimental impact on the broker's personality, and the quality of the service, caused mainly by stress, insufficient language skills and lack of, experience, was brought to light. Although the article presents merely a piece of the study comprised of 19 interviews carried out with 55 participants, of a total length of 6h 45 minutes, the major challenge, posed by lack of specialized terminology, that young brokers face, cannot go unnoticed. Finally, it shows that children far too often broker in challenging settings and tend to struggle with the complexity of the utterance being exposed to the vocabulary comprehensible to them in English, however, unfamiliar in Polish. These young brokers are capable of decoding the message and often comprehend its general meaning, nevertheless, subject to a combination of factors, i.e. lack of vocabulary equivalents, no trained translation techniques, pressure of the responsibility entrusted in them by their parents, time constraints, and many others, find the message difficult to deliver. It is an attempt to shed new light on the reality of Polish child brokers' lives in the UK and the concept of brokering in particularly demanding linguistic contexts.

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