

# Re-thinking Neutrality Through Emotional Labour: The (In)visible Work of Conference Interpreters

Irem Ayan

Volume 33, Number 2, 2e semestre 2020

Matérialités de la traduction : le livre, la ville, le corps  
Materialities of Translation: The Book, the City, the Body

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077714ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077714ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

## ISSN

0835-8443 (print)

1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Ayan, I. (2020). Re-thinking Neutrality Through Emotional Labour: The (In)visible Work of Conference Interpreters. *TTR*, 33(2), 125–146.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1077714ar>

## Article abstract

Relying upon a combination of ethnomethodological and sociological tools provided by Hochschild's (2003 [1983]) theory of emotional labour, this article examines the concept of the interpreter's neutrality as a form of feeling management at work which requires interpreters to align their behaviours with the norms shaping each interpreting setting. Drawing on the interviews conducted between March and August 2018 with twenty-one interpreters working in various social, cultural, and institutional settings, the study describes the interpreter's emotional labour in the context of conference interpreting, and argues that the interpreter's actual task of becoming the voice of the speaker intrinsically involves emotional labour. Achieving neutrality entails suppressing personal beliefs and displaying certain emotions which may not always be genuine in some contexts, and tending to the needs of clients in others. The conceptual framework of emotional labour offers an important analytical tool to re-visit theoretically and empirically not only the notion of the interpreter's neutrality from a critical perspective, but also the incoherence of professional codes of practice, which oftentimes leaves interpreters in a practical and ethical quandary.

# Re-thinking Neutrality Through Emotional Labour: The (In)visible Work of Conference Interpreters

Irem Ayan

*State University of New York at Binghamton*

## Abstract

Relying upon a combination of ethnomethodological and sociological tools provided by Hochschild's (2003 [1983]) theory of emotional labour, this article examines the concept of the interpreter's neutrality as a form of feeling management at work which requires interpreters to align their behaviours with the norms shaping each interpreting setting. Drawing on the interviews conducted between March and August 2018 with twenty-one interpreters working in various social, cultural, and institutional settings, the study describes the interpreter's emotional labour in the context of conference interpreting, and argues that the interpreter's actual task of becoming the voice of the speaker intrinsically involves emotional labour. Achieving neutrality entails suppressing personal beliefs and displaying certain emotions which may not always be genuine in some contexts, and tending to the needs of clients in others. The conceptual framework of emotional labour offers an important analytical tool to re-visit theoretically and empirically not only the notion of the interpreter's neutrality from a critical perspective, but also the incoherence of professional codes of practice, which oftentimes leaves interpreters in a practical and ethical quandary.

**Keywords:** conference interpreting, neutrality, impartiality, emotional labour, interpreting ethics

## Résumé

En s'appuyant sur une combinaison de perspectives ethno-méthodologiques et sociologiques offertes par le concept de « travail émotionnel » développé par Hochschild (2003 [1983]), le présent article étudie la neutralité de l'interprète comme une forme de gestion des émotions au travail qui demande aux interprètes de mettre leur comportement en conformité avec les normes régissant chaque contexte d'interprétation. Partant d'une série d'entrevues menées entre mars et août 2018 avec vingt et un interprètes provenant de divers contextes sociaux, culturels et institutionnels, la présente étude décrit le travail

émotionnel de l'interprète dans le contexte de l'interprétation de conférence et fait valoir que la tâche véritable de l'interprète, qui consiste à devenir la voix de l'orateur, exige un travail émotionnel. Le fait d'atteindre la neutralité a pour nature, dans certains contextes, d'éliminer des convictions personnelles et d'afficher des émotions qui ne sont pas toujours authentiques et, dans d'autres, de veiller aux besoins des clients. Le concept de travail émotionnel constitue un outil analytique important, non seulement pour interroger théoriquement et empiriquement la notion de la neutralité de l'interprète, mais également pour mettre en relief l'incohérence des codes de déontologie qui placent souvent les interprètes devant un dilemme éthique et matériel.

**Mots-clés :** interprétation de conférence, neutralité, impartialité, travail émotionnel, codes déontologiques

## Introduction

The majority of professional codes of ethics addressing conference interpreting indicate neutrality as one of the main requirements.<sup>1</sup> The principle of the interpreter's neutrality, or impartiality as commonly used in the context of public service interpreting, requires that interpreters should not allow their personal opinions, ideologies and worldviews to influence their rendering (see Setton and Prunč, 2015).<sup>2</sup> Although this principle is not explicitly spelled out in all codes of ethics, it is considered taken-for-granted, and essential for settings of conference interpreting which are predominantly influenced by the birthplace of the profession, namely the Western culture and traditions (Kalina, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

Although neutrality serves as a fundamental basis for providing equal and impartial service to all participants in the context of conference interpreting, identifying with each speaker in order to be objective represents a contradiction. Interpreters adjust their utterances, facial, and body gestures, and their decisions in line with

1. In addition to neutrality, the majority of codes set up by professional associations addressing conference and court interpreting consider accuracy, completeness, and confidentiality as the principal requirements of interpreting practice (see Hale, 2007, 2008).

2. Although impartiality is more frequently used in relation to community interpreting, sometimes it is interchangeably used in the literature with neutrality in the context of conference interpreting (see Setton and Dawrant, 2016). Some scholars, on the other hand, introduce a more analytical distinction, discussing impartiality in relation to the interpreter's social role and function, and neutrality in terms of the discursive construction of realities in each act of communication (see Setton and Prunč, 2015).

3. See for instance AIIC (2018).

various social factors that are at stake in an interpreting setting. In some situations, they may have to, and encouraged to, suppress or hide their own personal thoughts, preferences, and ideologies to achieve the desired neutral performance. Neutrality is not what interpreters actually perform, yet it is what many think they display in their performances. Thus, this article argues that the concept of neutrality or impartiality as endorsed by various codes of practice, and reinforced through training can be analyzed and understood in reality as an unacknowledged, filtered, and adjusted performance in a specific context delivered by the interpreter's "worked-up me."<sup>4</sup> In other words, neutral-seeming performance can be considered as an indispensable component of the mental and emotional work put into action by interpreters since that is what it takes to deliver the desired impartial vocal and bodily performance in a socially and institutionally-approved way.

Against this background, drawing on Arlie Russell Hochschild's (2003 [1983]) theory of emotional labour, the present study seeks to examine conference interpreters' striving towards the expected neutrality. It first provides a brief overview of the literature on neutrality which calls into question the ethics of practice. It then outlines the concept of emotional labour, and examines how neutrality can be re-thought in the context of conference interpreting as a form of feeling management tied to making money. Following a discussion on methodology, the study explores various forms of emotional labour carried out in diplomatic and business settings by referring to interpreters' own voices. Not only does the analytical tool of emotional labour offer a critical perspective to re-visit how interpreters enact neutrality, but it also allows us to see the extent to which feeling management is both implicitly and explicitly imposed upon interpreters under the name of good and ethical performance.

## **1. Conceptual Overview of (Ethical) Neutrality**

Neutrality has been one of the most debated topics in interpreting research and practice. While on the one hand, some researchers and professional codes of practice offer guidelines as to how to achieve the ideal performance through neutrality (see Setton and Dawrant, 2016), a majority of scholars in the field, on the other hand, argue that

---

4. Here, I am referring to Hochschild's definition of separating the private from the public self, or in her words, the "at-ease me" from the "worked-up me" (2003 [1983], p. 132).

neutral performance is virtually unattainable (see Wadensjö, 1998; Inghilleri, 2003, 2005, 2012; Angelelli, 2004a, 2004b; Diriker, 2004; Bot, 2005; Hale, 2007, 2008; Monacelli, 2009). Robin Setton and Andrew Dawrant, for instance, discuss the nuanced understanding of the concept juxtaposing guidelines dictating neutrality for different contexts of conference interpreting, and acknowledge that one set of specific rules of neutrality “cannot be applicable to all interpreting situations” (2016, p. 377). Depending on by whom, for whom, and in what context conference interpreters are employed, there indeed exist variations in norms, client expectations, interpreter behaviours, and even ethical decisions involved in the process of interpreting. While on the one hand, interpreters employed by intergovernmental organizations are expected to work neutrally for all parties gathered in multinational settings, having the role of “an international civil servant, acting impartially and independently, with allegiance not to any member state but only to the organization and its objectives as set forth in its charter” (*ibid.*, p. 378), on the other, in contexts such as diplomatic, business, military and in-house interpreting, interpreters are usually only tasked with rendering into the target language the remarks of the side which employ their services, functioning as “attached” or “affiliated” actors “following the codes of conduct set by their employers” (*ibid.*, p. 380). There are also “ambivalent and unstructured situations” in which interpreters may be hired and remunerated by one party, but asked to provide interpretation services for the entire event (*ibid.*, p. 381). In complex settings such as these, interpreters may find themselves in a position to exercise their own professional and moral judgement.

It would be fair to argue that none of the senses described above are consistent with being completely neutral or impartial. Even in the context of multinational organizations where interpreters, whether employed as staff or freelance, are considered international civil servants with no allegiance to any party, they align themselves with the objectives of the organization, hence taking sides with the organization in question. This virtually unattainable nature of neutrality marked by myths as well as the many facets of interpreters’ involvement during the process of interpreting have often led to increased attention to questions of ethics (Rudvin, 2007; Baker and Maier, 2011; Inghilleri, 2012). Mona Baker and Carol Maier, for instance, draw our attention to the growing interest shown by professional translators and interpreters in ethical issues arising from

their positioning in a social context which is becoming more and more morally challenging due to the “significant developments taking place today in all areas of society” (2011, p. 2). Instead of emphasizing the traditional assumption that interpreters are primarily responsible to their clients, Baker and Maier underline the changing criteria for evaluating interpreter performance, suggesting that the idea of “interpreter accountability” has become a new category by which to judge interpreters. Accountability increases interpreters’ visibility, holding them responsible for their decision-making and behaviour which can potentially have a significant impact not only on their clients and interlocutors, but also on themselves as individuals. The discrepancy between what occurs in the act of interpreting and the standards of practice encouraging neutrality “as expressed in numerous codes of practice and taught in most classrooms can leave many practitioners with a sense of unease or disorientation” (*ibid.*, p. 7). To illustrate their point, Baker and Maier refer to a morally taxing situation experienced by a New York-based translator, Simon Fortin, who was “hired to do the voice-over for a French version of the annual video report of a high-profile religious organization” (cited in Cohen, 2010, n. p.) which included comments critical of gay marriage. The interpreter, Simon Fortin, strongly disagreed with the views expressed, but also noticed linguistic errors, which left him in a practical quandary:

During the recording session, I noticed various language errors. Nobody there but I spoke French, and I considered letting these errors go: my guilt-free sabotage. Ultimately, I made the corrections. As a married gay man, I felt ethically compromised even taking this job. Did I betray my tribe by correcting the copy? (*ibid.*, n. p.)

Dilemmas such as the above arising from the interpreters’ struggles to embody a speaker amidst conflicting agendas have also drawn our attention to interpreters’ subjective emotional experience (see Rojo López *et al.*, 2014). Referring to interpreting activity as “zone of uncertainty” which represents a site where interpreters’ *habitus* might clash with that of participants, Moira Inghilleri (2005) mentions the uneasiness potentially generated by such contexts on the part of legal interpreters, due to unequal power relations embedded in their work. On the other hand, Zrinka Stahuljak discusses the interpreter’s violent internal conflict, and argues that interpreters are “torn between political allegiance to their country and professional

neutrality, in other words between testimony and translation" (2000, p. 43). Carol Maier, in a similar vein, elaborates on the experience of "intervenience" (cited in Munday, 2008, p. 3) by relating the story of an experienced Chilean interpreter who writes about the "shattering effect" that an interpreting assignment in a legal context might have on the interpreter (*ibid.*). Referring to the interpreter as an "intervenient being," Maier names the clash between the emotional response and the professional dilemma as a "form of abrasion" that legal interpreters face, highlighting the emotional burden placed on the shoulders of the interpreter (*ibid.*, p. 4).

The interpreters' emotional experience can offer valuable insights regarding how they carry out their work under various circumstances. Drawing on her case study in which she studied volunteer simultaneous interpreters' involvement and detachment in religious settings in Finland with autoethnography, Sari Hokkanen argues that by taking interpreters' subjective experiences of involvement and detachment, "we can examine the ways in which their role is constructed within and through a combination of personal, social, and material factors related to the setting and the interpreter's working conditions" (2017, p. 62). The interpreter's struggle to negotiate neutrality, according to Hokkanen, unavoidably triggers somatic responses which indicate various levels of "familiarity, sympathy, foreignness, or even repulsion" (*ibid.*, p. 65). In this respect, the sociological tools offered by Hochschild's theory of emotional labour allow us to have the appropriate terminology for an analysis and methodology. The next section will explore how emotional labour can be operationalized in the context of conference interpreting.

## 2. Re-thinking Neutrality Through Emotional Labour

The notion of working on emotions for a wage, in other words "emotional labour" as labeled and introduced by Hochschild, has inspired an outpouring of research on workers such as doormen, waiters, HR managers, receptionists, prison officers, bankers, and so forth (see Ward and McMurray, 2015). Through her ethnographic exploration of the experience of modern-day flight attendants and bill collectors, Hochschild defines the term as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (2003 [1983], p. 7). In other words, emotional labourers mask, hide, or suppress emotions they feel, or display emotions they do not feel in order to create a suitable professional countenance and behaviour.

In these jobs involving “face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact” with the public (*ibid.*, p. 147), “the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself” (*ibid.*, p. 5). In other words, emotions are transformed into a commodity to be bought and sold.<sup>5</sup>

Interpreters’ emotional struggles to abide by the professional codes of practice in different settings were recently brought up particularly in terms of emotional labour by Gunilla Carstensen and Leif Dahlberg (2017) in the context of court interpreting. Referring to the tension between being impartial (which involves standing outside, being objective and professional) and what interpreters actually do, that is “listening—being present, observant, empathic and understanding to what is not said explicitly,” Carstensen and Dahlberg re-frame the notion of impartiality as “to be but not to be seen” (2017, p. 52), understanding it to be a characteristic of “emotional work.”<sup>6</sup> In a different context, Duygu Tekgül (2020) analyzes faith-related interpreting as emotional labour, underlining the interpreter’s active emotional involvement. Relying on ethnographic methods, she explores how interpreters employ “strategies of emotional mirroring” including “affective intonation, fillers, mimics and gestures, and body language” (2020, p. 49). When taken into consideration in the context of conference interpreting, the concept of emotional labour aligns with the neutral role of the interpreter. Even the arguments that support and encourage neutrality involve working on performance, which itself represents a form of emotional labour. This is clearly spelled out in some professional ethos of neutrality dictating interpreters to deliver a “good” performance, referring to the acting-like nature of

---

5. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss Marx’s influence on Hochschild’s theorization of emotional labour, it is important to note that Hochschild juxtaposes a theory of alienation with Marx’s critique of wage labour; i.e., the difference between exchange value and use value of a commodity on the market, and argues that “emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (2003 [1983], p. 7).

6. Carstensen and Dahlberg (2017) mention various forms of “emotional work” and strategies performed by court interpreters such as toning down emotions, using a calm voice and appearance and/or avoiding clients to cope with stressful working conditions. They seem to use the term “emotional work” to refer to what Hochschild means by “emotional labour”. However, Hochschild does not use these concepts interchangeably. After introducing the term, Hochschild distinguished “emotion work”, which she defines as unpaid emotional work that a person undertakes in private life, from “emotional labour”, which she describes as emotional work done in a paid work setting.



the profession. As the extract below from the AIIC Practical Guide for Professional Conference Interpreters reminds us:

In a number of respects, good interpreting is like acting. As the speaker's alter ego, you must strive to convey both the substance and the emphasis, tone, and nuance of what is said, so as to allow your delegates to comprehend the speaker's messages just as clearly as effectively as those who are listening to the original. Watch the delegates listening to you for their reactions and hold their attention by being not only accurate but convincing. Make them forget they are hearing the speaker through an interpreter. (AIIC, 2016, n. p.)

Becoming each speaker's "alter ego" to be neutral or impartial is incommensurable. The argument that interpreters are required to identify both morally and culturally with each speaker in order to render not only the semantic content of the utterances, but also the manner in which those utterances are voiced involves more than merely translating words from one language into another (see Camayd-Freixas, 2013).<sup>7</sup> "Interpreting is like acting" is the motto that interpreters are taught and encouraged to uphold. However, interpreting is quite different from acting in a sense that it takes place in a setting in which interpreters' voice, body language, and performance take on the attributes of the people around them, and their inspiration to embody their speakers is not with the intention to accomplish a work of art as it is the case in stage or screen acting.<sup>8</sup> In other words, interpreters sell their voices for someone else's benefit by performing neutrality. They are paid for embodying someone else's utterances, and transforming the thoughts and words that are not originally theirs into the target language by creating the analogous meaning and feeling of the source language. This imposed task upon interpreters, the various efforts it involves, as well as the urge to embed the "awareness" of it in interpreter training programs can be clearly seen in the literature:

---

7. For a detailed discussion on the incoherence of code of ethics in legal interpreting, see Erik Camayd-Freixas' (2013) autoethnographic study on Postville raid.

8. In arguing that the "acting" required by interpreting is different from that of stage and screen acting, I follow Hochschild (2003 [1983]) in her assertion that the illusion we create in order to embody a person for a performance with the purpose of accomplishing a work of art is different from the illusion we create for professional purposes to make money. See Hochschild (*ibid.*) for a detailed analysis of the difference between the feeling management we create for a wage and the one stage actors do for the sake of performing a work of art.

Suppress your own convictions and opinions, never betraying your own sympathies in the interpretation (e.g., through tone of voice, audible reaction, level of animation, let alone side commentary). This is achieved not by “just translating” without thinking too much about the issues, but takes self-awareness, discipline and sometimes some effort, and must be instilled from “day one” of professional training. (Setton and Dawrant, 2016, p. 378)

Enacting the expected neutrality is a complex process, and it involves policing one's own emotions. It entails delivering the “convincing performance” which requires “both the suppression or control of feelings that would spoil the performance and the stimulation of emotions that are necessary to the performance” (Scott, 1990, pp. 28-29). When we empirically look at what interpreters are recounting with regards to their roles, their words indeed indicate the performance of emotional labour as a concrete, lived experience, and not an abstract concept, as will be explained in what follows.

### **3. The Parameters of the Study**

This study focuses on interviews conducted with twenty-one conference interpreters working in various social and cultural contexts. I gathered my data via in-depth semi-structured interviews using snowball sampling. Sixteen interpreters I interviewed work as freelancers, and the remaining five are affiliated with a government institution or a private company as staff interpreters. Fifteen of them are female. The remaining six are male interpreters. All the interpreters I interviewed had university degrees in translation and interpreting. Two had PhD degrees, one of which was in interpreting studies, and the other one was in translation studies. Two subjects were currently enrolled in a doctoral program in translation studies. Nine participants are members of a national association of conference interpreters. Five are members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC). The interpreters I interviewed have a total number of seven different languages represented in their language combinations. Ten interpreters work with only two languages including their mother tongues. Nine interpreters have three languages in their language combinations. The remaining two have a strong command of a third language, yet they do not use it for professional purposes.

I conducted my interviews between March and August 2018. Out of the twenty-one interviews two were conducted in English,

the others I translated myself. Since the interpreters' networks are small, and the professional stakes are high, I am not identifying the languages from which I translated. Interpreters' testimonies are deeply rooted in their particular situations and cultural details, which I mostly omitted for confidentiality reasons. It should be recognized that some degree of "loss and gain in translation" (Venuti, 2005) may have inevitably occurred in my attempts to re-create interpreters' utterances in English. These biases, as well as "those arising from the subject being interviewed, those arising from the researcher and those arising from the subject researcher interaction" (Plummer, 2001, p. 155), and my position as co-creator of knowledge along with the interpreters must be acknowledged.

This study draws on a tradition of phenomenology which understands knowledge as inter-subjectively created. It emphasizes subjective self-understanding of interpreters. Their social position enables them to have an epistemologically privileged perspective on the material conditions of their work. On the other hand, benefiting from innovations in reflexive anthropology introduced in the 1970s (see Rabinow, 1977), and widely adopted more recently in some critical strains of sociology (see Chaudhry, 2009), this research also employs a combination of ethnography and autoethnography. Ethnography aims to learn from the knowledge occurring from the interaction between the researcher and the participant. Autoethnography, on the other hand, offers researchers the opportunity to draw upon their own personal lived experience, particularly in relation to the group of which they are a member.<sup>9</sup> In this shared and co-constructed reality, my role as a researcher as well as my relationship to the phenomenon I am studying become crucial. It allows me to fulfill what Harold Garfinkel (2002) names "unique adequacy requirement", and it is of both epistemological and methodological importance.<sup>10</sup> It is epistemologically crucial in terms of what I know about performing neutrality. Relying in part on my own experience to construct the problem offers me the ability to articulate my insider knowledge of a professional and cultural experience which other researchers may not be able to know. Methodologically, it is important in terms of how I did my research, and how I gained my interviewees' confidence.

9. See Camayd-Freixas (2013) and Hokkanen (2017) for examples of autoethnographic work in the field of interpreting studies.

10. Unique adequacy requirement indicates the researcher's detailed familiarity with the phenomenon they are studying (see Garfinkel, 2002).

My position allows me to ask substantial questions regarding the phenomenon I am investigating.

It was important nonetheless to bracket my own experiences and be open to a range of new standpoints. In following interpreters in their own perceptions both acknowledging but also trying to bracket my own set of lived experiences, I was introduced to understandings, of which I had never thought. Akin to the experience of Carstensen and Dahlberg (2017), emotional labour theory emerged as an issue in my interviews that I had not fully anticipated. I had not expected that interpreters' narratives of moral dissonance, unease, and feeling flummoxed would lead me to Hochschild's theory of emotional labour. I was interested in understanding how speaking through another "I" impacts interpreters' sense of identity, including race and gender. I wanted to understand how they perform on the "social stage," creating an impression of themselves for the benefit of a target audience (Goffman, 1959). My aim was to investigate in depth their identification with various speakers, or in Ebru Diriker's terms, "tension of co-existing with an alien 'I' in the delivery" (2004, p. 137), one that I have experienced innumerable times.

A great majority of the interpreters I interviewed claimed that they see their roles as impartial participants in interpreted encounters. They defined themselves as neutral transmitters of utterances back and forth between various parties. When I asked them to describe their understanding of the "ideal interpreter," they spontaneously used the language of emotional labour, defining the ideal interpreter as "someone who doesn't have an anxious look on their face," or "someone who could give the impression that they could facilitate communication" or even "someone who is able to display a confident look even if they are panicking." As one female interpreter emphasized, "interpreters need to have high emotional quotient (EQ) in addition to high intelligence quotient (IQ)".<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, when I asked an interpreter in my third interview what she thinks about the embodiment of a speaker with a different gender, race, ethnicity, and social class than hers, she voiced her struggles in moments of interpreting utterances that are diametrically opposed to her own beliefs. This intrigued me, and in order to examine it more deeply I decided to include this aspect in my interviews, overtly asking interpreters how they behave and perform in such cases. In

---

11. Interviews with conference interpreters, April and May 2018, translation mine.

what follows, I confine myself to the examples in which interpreters explicitly use the language of emotional labour as well as the contexts in which they experienced emotional and semantic disagreements with regards to the content as well as the tone of the utterances.

#### 4. The Emotional Labour of the Conference Interpreter

Based on what interpreters described to me, there are three sides of emotional labour of the interpreter that bear mentioning. The first one is ego-stroking, that is acting like a good housewife or hostess, to tend to clients and their needs. This type of emotional labour is not expected from female interpreters only, and it is mostly carried out in—but not necessarily limited to—contexts of consecutive and escort interpreting, both of which can require accompanying VIP clients, e.g., members of a high-level delegation, to various places such as conference venues, meeting rooms, business dinners, ceremonial types of gatherings, live press conferences or even construction sites. Depending on the client's profile and socio-cultural background, subservience is embedded in this form of emotional labour, akin to common forms of secretary and hostess-like behaviour or a personal assistant role, any of which might be implicitly or explicitly expected from the interpreter in some of those contexts. This form of emotional labour might also have to do with making people laugh at the right time if jokes are involved in the utterances to be interpreted, or modulating the anger or level of crisis which might arise in such contexts. It can also take forms of practice whose deontological acceptability may be questioned. A staff interpreter working for a government organization mentioned switching to reported speech mode in a consecutive interpreting setting when I asked him how he was dealing with moments in which he must interpret statements against his own personal views. Although in diplomatic and business settings attached interpreters are sometimes expected, albeit not explicitly, to perform extra services such as optimizing their interpretation for their own side through specific jargon, and even omissions and opinions, this interpreter's shift in his *footing* (see Goffman, 1981)<sup>12</sup> indicates his tending to the needs of his employer:

I was in a bilateral meeting. It was not necessarily against my own views, but the other party said something which I thought the head

12. As Erving Goffman (1981) argues, there are moments in which we attempt to change our position within a social interaction by shifting our *footing* vis-à-vis one another. Shifts in *footing*, that is in our stance or alignment, can affect social roles, tone, task, and interpersonal relations.

of the organization I was working for would not appreciate at all. I interpreted the statement using reported speech. I translated to my own side exactly what the other party said, but I just added “he claims that” in front of my rendering. (Interview with an interpreter, July 2018, translation mine)

Diriker (2004) speaks of interpreters’ shift from using the speaker’s first person to the third person as a tool to distance themselves from the speaker for a reason such as exposing the speaker.<sup>13</sup> In the context of mental health interpreting, Hanneke Bot argues that such “divergence means that the interpreter’s worldview is introduced into the dialogue” (2005, p.190). Although the interpreter above made it clear that the utterances were not necessarily against his own opinions, the addition of reported speech followed by a translation gives him enough leeway to disown the statement by carefully tailoring his performance for the sake of his employer’s appreciation.

The second aspect of emotional labour is quite different, yet sometimes overlaps with the first one; it is embodying the emotions of the speaker in order to reflect his or her utterance with the correct emotional tone and feeling in the target language. Interpreters recreate the said, in other words, the semantic of statements in the target language. Their task is to reflect those utterances as they are with an emotional tone in the target language deemed faithful to the speaker. A particular statement might trigger certain feelings in an interpreter, producing a range of internal responses which might not be compatible with the speaker’s own views or feelings. Regardless of what interpreters personally think, however, their task is to create the analogous meaning and feeling for the audience.

In addition to the layer of semantic meaning, there is also the emotional tone of the original utterance. The statement might be

---

13. In my interviews, switching to the third person in some problematic situations was first mentioned by the fifth interpreter whom I interviewed. When I asked other interpreters in my following interviews what they think about using a reporting verb, they voiced differing opinions. Some indicated that it is not appropriate to “otherize” the speaker, reiterating that it is totally against the norms of interpreting. Some, on the contrary, confessed that switching to reported speech in problematic contexts such as interpreting utterances that are against their own beliefs and ideologies, is sometimes “life-saving,” “safe” and “practical.” Although it is beyond the scope of this article, a few freelance interpreters also mentioned switching to the third person during both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting settings in order not only to distance themselves from their speakers, but also to “punish them” (in their own words) by exposing the “unacceptable utterances” that they had to interpret.

uttered in the source language with a certain tone such as sarcasm, ire, joy, or shame and so on. This might be compatible with what interpreters personally think and feel about the content of the statement, or, on the contrary, their somatic response (see Robinson, 1991) might be totally the opposite of the emotional connotation that appears in the speaker's utterance. In other words, they might find themselves interpreting a sarcastic statement they either do or do not agree with either semantically or emotionally. Similarly, they might have to add some degree of anger to their voice while interpreting a speaker's anger-inflected statement, or raise their voice to indicate anger when they themselves feel no anger at all. If they do not do this, that is, if interpreters intentionally deprive the meaning expressed of its emotional content, the message as well as its intent and nuance might not get across properly. A recorded example of this kind of emotional disagreement can be found in one of the panel discussions of the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009 in which the then Prime Minister of Turkey angrily accuses the then President of Israel of human rights violations. In the session broadcast live, we hear a female interpreter interpreting the utterances of accusation simultaneously (World Economic Forum, 2009). Her voice indicates her struggle to cope with the sudden shift in the flow of discussion which becomes aggressive. The emotional dimension of this change in tone can be heard in the interpreter's hesitant rendering which misses some parts and details from the beginning of the exchange. The interpreter did not show the exact anger which was meant to be a political *tour de force* displayed by the then Turkish prime minister. Although she was not performing the emotional labour (in the negative sense), she was enacting the first category of emotional labour that goes unnoticed, that is, when she was toning down the negative emotions in order to ensure that some degree of civility was maintained between the two politicians.

Interpreters may also find themselves performing different kinds of emotions. One freelance interpreter whom I interviewed underlined the importance of "wearing that smile and giving your voice the right tone," and how this is "essential for conveying the meaning accurately" in the context of interpreting humour when I asked him whether there are any specific ways in which he regulates his body to behave in a certain way in a professional setting. He emphasized the need to pay particular attention to making himself smile while



interpreting jokes, especially in consecutive interpreting settings.<sup>14</sup> Smile is more than mere muscle flexing. It is a muscle flexing which is meant to impart a certain type of emotion in the audience. Another freelance interpreter, on the other hand, mentioned her frustration in a context of simultaneous interpreting when I asked her whether she thinks her body has ever let her down during work. In the setting in question, which falls under the category of “ambivalent situations” according to Setton and Dawrant’s (2016) nomenclature (that is being hired by one party, but asked to provide interpreting services for the entire event), this interpreter failed to convey her crying speaker’s words and feelings “powerfully enough” (in her own words) to the audience:

I was interpreting one girl from the countryside. She was telling a very moving story of how she became devoted to voluntary work. It made me feel the same emotions as her. The people who understood her started crying too. I tried my best to interpret, but I felt like my tone was not as powerful as hers. I felt like my language didn’t create the same resonance in the English speakers’ heart. I felt frustrated, which made me feel really bad afterwards, but then I tried to comfort myself saying that “these things can happen” in our job. (Interview with a conference interpreter, March 2018, English original)

In addition to emotional discrepancy, and not being able to perform the right emotions despite feeling them in a specific context, semantic disagreements can also put interpreters in a difficult situation. In November 2013, a UN interpreter did not realize her microphone was on whilst criticizing the General Assembly’s adoption of nine politically-motivated resolutions condemning Israel (UN Watch, 2013). This brief moment of honesty displayed by the interpreter reveals the mental and emotional work that she carries out in addition to her actual task of becoming the voice of the speaker. In a similar vein, interpreters whom I interviewed also provided me with a few examples of semantic disagreement when I asked them how they were dealing with situations in which they are tasked with interpreting problematic utterances. Consider the statement below from an in-house interpreter working for a telecommunication company:

I hear about difficult experiences that some of my colleagues working with public institutions have due to differing political and ideological views. I think I can put distance between myself and my profession in

---

14. Interview with an interpreter, June 2018, translation mine.



this regard. Since I work in the private sector, the relations between public institutions and the company I work for remain mostly at a commercial level. Of course, there were situations in which I would have preferred not interpreting the utterances I had to interpret. However, as I said, since our relations are mainly commercial, I might be considerably less exposed to those difficult contexts of ideological clashes compared to my freelancer colleagues. I have never interpreted statements or utterances which made me feel bad afterwards. What I really like about my profession is that I act like an ambassador. I do not take any stance. I actually like very much not taking any stance. All I need to do is to convey the message from one party to another. Shall I feel remorse if I were to translate Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*? Not at all. That's exactly what I like about this profession. Interpreting utterances that are annoying would not disturb me at all. (Interview with a conference interpreter, June 2018, translation mine)

As a follow-up question, I asked this interpreter whether he ever felt the need to filter or censor his delivery, or even regulate his behaviour according to an institutional expectation or even to the needs of a specific audience. He provided me with examples of utterances that are “inconsiderately” (in his own words) made by the CEO of the company he works for which, he thinks, might not have been welcomed by some high-level audience members in the press conference to which he was referring. He emphasized that those utterances might also have put the company's reputation at risk if he, as an interpreter, had not filtered them. He did not exactly remember how the CEO in that moment pointed out at the governing body of the country where he works, but he said that the words that the CEO used to describe it sounded very “banal” to his ears, and deprived the governing body of its “grandeur.” He confessed that he interpreted the utterances using a flowery register coupled with stronger adjectives in order to avoid making it sound “banal” to the target audience as it did to his ears in the source language. My next follow-up question, “do you really think you are not taking any stance at all by making such modifications in your rendering?” confused him, which eventually led him to say that he simply represents the company, and he would make any necessary intervention in order not to tarnish the company's reputation. In a similar vein, some scholars have highlighted how interpreters sometimes act to save face (self-preservation) and/or the dignity of their clients (Monacelli, 2009). In a 2016 study, for instance, Magnifico and Defrancq investigate interpreters' tendency to down-tone Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) in a corpus of French

to English/Dutch interpreted speeches at the European Parliament. Acting to save the reputation of the company represents “the right performance” in the context above according to the interpreter, which can be read as a form of emotional labour manifested through the lexical adjustments that the interpreter made to his rendering.

There is also a third aspect of emotional labour in the context of interpreting which I define as shock-absorbing. In addition to being exposed to the shock of interpreting problematic utterances, this type of emotional labour occurs when a client, an event organizer, or even a colleague expresses his or her anger towards the interpreter, and the interpreter just needs to take it in like a shock absorber for professional reasons. This has a very clear gender component. When female interpreters are, for instance, sexualized and harassed in business or high-level diplomatic settings, or when male interpreters are perceived to be gay and consequently had to deal with abusive clients, as emerged in my interviews, they “had to take it in” in order to “maintain the professional countenance and performance” (in their own words). Interpreters also reported on the multiple instances that they refused to work (declining the offer, quitting the assignment), and that they even “wanted to punish the speaker” (in their own words) through various forms of breaches they introduced into the socially and deontologically-acceptable way of practicing interpreting.<sup>15</sup>

As can be understood from the third form of emotional labour above, a subcategory to all these three forms of emotional labour is the feeling management of one’s own response when something unexpected or unacceptable occurs. For instance, the way interpreters manage their own emotional response when they feel like their body and interpreting services are exploited by their abusive clients whose requests would force them to work beyond their contract hours, or when they are asked to carry out an irrelevant task that has *nothing* to do with their professional skills or capacity as an interpreter, such as carrying high-level delegation members’ belongings or bringing coffee, tea, or fruits for them. These examples are all related to the first form of emotional labour, that is tending to clients and their needs, acting in a nice, friendly way. An example of managing one’s own response as a subcategory to the second form of emotional labour involves preventing one’s genuine beliefs and opinions from rising to

---

15. I deem it appropriate to analyze such acts of resistance and sabotage under the category of interpreters’ alienated relationship to their work, which is outside the scope of this present article.

the surface by keeping a neutral look, and stance. With respect to this, a seasoned freelance interpreter recalls her attempts to depersonalize the context, and explains how she operationalizes “autopilot mode” (in her own words) to prevent herself from being trapped in problematic situations:

You have asked me how I am interpreting in stressful contexts in which statements that are against my own ideology are being made. Of course, I do feel the difference of my speaker’s social profile. Every person feels it. However, in those moments, I think it is a special area in the brain which activates itself. Something like a panic button. It prevents you from bringing your feelings to the forefront. It gives you a certain cool headedness. I guess in those moments my panic button activates. I find myself interpreting in autopilot mode without being trapped in the context, and, of course, this influences the quality of my rendering in a bad way. (Interview with a conference interpreter, June 2018, translation mine).

The interviews indicate that interpreters have internalized managing their own feelings as a form of “neutrality,” and even taking care of their clients or speakers’ emotions as an indication of “fidelity.” The term neutrality as presented and encouraged in numerous guidelines sugar-coats what is really occurring in the act of interpreting. Interpreters’ striving for the desired neutrality depending on the nature of their work context, reflecting the tone in the original, and policing their own emotions to deliver the expected performance involves emotional labour. Even though interpreters believe that they can “depersonalize” the situation in order not to find themselves trapped in certain contexts, developing and operationalizing this ability is still a form of emotional labour (see Ward and McMurray, 2015). The act of regulation is the same both inside and outside when felt and displayed emotions are incongruent as the examples above demonstrate.

## Conclusion

The present article has attempted to challenge the norms of professional practice by re-visiting the interpreter’s neutral role from the perspective of emotional labour, and re-define the notion of neutrality as a filtered and adjusted performance which conceals within itself a form of feeling management. The theoretical framework offered by the concept of emotional labour allows a more nuanced reading of neutrality, changing the focus from the endless debates with

regards to whether neutrality is attainable and tenable. The empirical analysis in this study suggests that focusing on neutrality as a form of emotional labour that interpreters are implicitly, and sometimes even explicitly, asked to carry out provides valuable insights to construct a valid discussion on the reality of their work. Emotional labour is intrinsically involved in the interpreter's actual task of becoming the voice of the speaker. It behooves us to acknowledge this, and all it implies in terms of interpreting practice.

The findings of this study exemplify the theoretical and methodological applicability of the concept of emotional labour in the context of conference interpreting. Although the examples presented in this article focus mainly on the contexts in which interpreters had to deal with emotional and semantic disagreements stemming from various socio-cultural factors, and may not necessarily occur in every single interpreting assignment, performing emotional labour for the sake of neutrality is complex and pervasive. It can also be alienating, which may trigger interpreters' subjective feelings of hatred towards their own role and interpretations in some contexts, and even lead to acts of resistance, sabotage, and refusal to perform the expected professional role in others, as emerged in my interviews. The alienating nature of emotional labour also has a clear gender dimension which adds a complex layer to the analysis of the interpreter's role and behaviour.

The lack of attention given to interpreters' first-hand experiences prevents us from thinking outside the box with regards to the present reality of their work. In order to enhance our understanding of the complex nature of emotional labour embedded in the practice of interpreting as well as the effects that maintaining a sustained and imposed neutral role may have on the interpreter, more analysis of interpreters' first-hand experience is needed. Drawing attention to interpreters' emotional labour and what it entails exactly, I am describing a social phenomenon as an interpreter and researcher from a sociological perspective rather than saying how things should be carried out or enacted regarding the practice of interpreting. Although further methodological questions such as the implications of this study for how interpreters should handle the situations they describe, or the implications for interpreters' training fall beyond the scope of this research, recognition of these issues can stimulate debates on the social role of the interpreter, offering new critical perspectives. The argument herein also suggests that interpreter

training programs educate future interpreters on the issues I have raised, rather than simply imposing neutrality or impartiality upon them as a form of mere acting. These questions merit additional and in-depth consideration for interpreting studies scholars and practicing interpreters to better understand and analyze the requirements and expectations of the role of the interpreter.

## References

- AIIC (2016). *Practical Guide for Professional Conference Interpreters*. [[https://aiic.org/document/547/AIICWebzine\\_Apr2004\\_2\\_Practical\\_guide\\_for\\_professional\\_conference\\_interpreters\\_EN.pdf](https://aiic.org/document/547/AIICWebzine_Apr2004_2_Practical_guide_for_professional_conference_interpreters_EN.pdf)] [consulted October 2, 2020].
- AIIC (2018). *Professional Codes of Ethics*. [[https://aiic.org/document/6299/Code%20of%20professional%20ethics\\_ENG.pdf](https://aiic.org/document/6299/Code%20of%20professional%20ethics_ENG.pdf)] [consulted October 3, 2020].
- Angelelli, Claudia Viviana (2004a). *Revisiting the Interpreter's Role: A Study of Conference, Court, and Medical Interpreters in Canada, Mexico, and the United States*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- Angelelli, Claudia Viviana (2004b). *Medical Interpreting and Cross-Cultural Communication*. Cambridge University Press.
- Baker, Mona and Carol Maier (2011). "Ethics in Interpreter and Translator Training: Critical Perspectives." *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 5, 1, pp. 1-14.
- Bot, Hanneke (2005). *Dialogue Interpreting in Mental Health*. Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi.
- Camayd-Freixas, Erik (2013). "Court Interpreter Ethics and the Role of Professional Organizations." In C. Schäffner *et al.*, eds. *Interpreting in a Changing Landscape*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- Carstensen, Gunilla and Leif Dahlberg (2017). "Court Interpreting as Emotional Work: A Pilot Study in Swedish Law Courts." *NoFo*, 14, pp. 45-64.
- Chaudry, Lubna Nazir (2009). "Forays into the Mist: Violences, Voices, Vignettes." In A. Y. Jackson and L. A. Mazzei, eds. *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging Conventional, Interpretive, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*, London/New York, Routledge.
- Cohen, Randy (2010). "Properly Speaking the Improper?". *The New York Times Magazine*, July 10. [<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/04/magazine/04FOB-Ethicist-t.html>] [consulted October 15, 2020].
- Diriker, Ebru (2004). *De-/Re-Contextualizing Conference Interpreting: Interpreters in the Ivory Tower?* Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- Garfinkel, Harold (2002). *Ethnomethodology's Program: Working out Durkheim's Aporism*. Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield.

- Goffman, Erving (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, Doubleday.
- Goffman, Erving (1981). *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hale, Sandra Beatriz (2007). *Community Interpreting*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hale, Sandra Beatriz (2008). "Controversies over the Role of the Court Interpreter." In C. Valero-Garcés and A. Martin, eds. *Crossing Borders in Community Interpreting: Definitions and Dilemmas*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins, pp. 99-121.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell (2003 [1983]). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Hokkanen, Sari (2017). "Experiencing the Interpreter's Role: Emotions of Involvement and Detachment in Simultaneous Church Interpreting." *Translation Spaces*, 6, 1, pp. 62-78.
- Inghilleri, Moira (2003). "Habitus, Field and Discourse: Interpreting as a Socially-situated Activity." *Target*, 15, 2, pp. 243-268.
- Inghilleri, Moira (2005). "Mediating Zones of Uncertainty: Interpreter Agency, the Interpreting Habitus and Political Asylum Adjudication." *The Translator*, 11, 1, pp. 69-85.
- Inghilleri, Moira (2012). *Interpreting Justice: Ethics, Politics and Language*. London/New York, Routledge.
- Kalina, Sylvia (2015). "Ethical Challenges in Different Interpreting Settings." *MonTI Special Issue*, 2, pp. 63-86.
- Magnifico, Cédric and Bart Defrancq (2016). "Impoliteness in Interpreting: A Question of Gender?" *Translation and Interpreting*, 8, 2, pp. 26-45.
- Monacelli, Claudia (2009). *Self-Preservation in Simultaneous Interpreting*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- Munday, Jeremy, ed. (2008). *Translation as Intervention*. London, Continuum.
- Plummer, Ken (2001). *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*. London, Sage Publications.
- Rabinow, Paul (1977). *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Robinson, Douglas (1991). *The Translator's Turn*. Baltimore/London, The John Hopkins University Press.
- Rojo López, Ana *et al.* (2014). "The Emotional Impact of Translation: A Heart Rate Study." *Journal of Pragmatics*, 71, pp. 31-44.
- Rudvin, Mette (2007). "Professionalism and Ethics in Community Interpreting: The Impact of Individualist versus Collective Group Identity." *Interpreting*, 9, 1, pp. 47-69.
- Scott, James (1990). *Domination and Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. London, Yale University Press.

- Setton, Robin and Erich Prunč (2015). "Neutrality." In F. Pöchhacker, ed. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp. 273-276.
- Setton, Robin and Andrew Dawrant (2016). *Conference Interpreting: A Complete Course*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- Stahuljak, Zrinka (2000). "Violent Distortions: Bearing Witness to the Task of Wartime Translators." *TTR*, 13, 1, pp. 37-51.
- Tekgül, Duygu (2020). "Faith-related Interpreting as Emotional Labour: A Case Study at a Protestant Armenian Church in Istanbul." *Perspectives*, 28, 1, pp. 43-57.
- UN Watch (2013). "Hot Mic Catches UN Interpreter Saying Anti-Israel Votes Are a Bit Much." [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7W5tsnd0BE>] [consulted October 8, 2020].
- Venuti, Lawrence (2005). "Translating Humor - Equivalence, Compensation, Discourse." *Performance Research*, 7, 2, pp. 6-16.
- Wadensjö, Cecilia (1998). *Interpreting as Interaction*. London/New York, Longman.
- Ward, Jenna and Robert McMurray (2015). *The Dark Side of Emotional Labour*. London/New York, Routledge.
- World Economic Forum (2009). "Gaza: The Case for Middle East Peace." [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR4zRbPy2kY>] [consulted October 8, 2020].

Irem Ayan

Translation Research and Instruction Program  
 Department of Romance Languages  
 State University of New York  
 Binghamton, USA  
 iayan@binghamton.edu