

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING: VOLUNTEER WORK AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT

Social commitment in translation and interpreting: a view from ECOS, translators and interpreters for solidarity

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Abstract: This article is a presentation of *ECOS, Traductores e Intérpretes por la Solidaridad* (ECOS, Translators and Interpreters for Solidarity), an association based in the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Granada. It reviews the history of the association, its philosophy and current lines of work. After a brief explanation of what we at ECOS understand by social commitment in translation and interpreting, it proceeds to an outline of the boundaries of this concept: who the volunteers are; how, when and where they do their work. It explains, too, that community interpreting is not the same as volunteer work, and reviews volunteer organizations in translation and interpreting, both in Spain and at the international level. Then it discusses the relation between social commitment and training in translation and interpreting, defending the view that translators and interpreters must be trained for society and not just for the market. Finally, the authors conclude with a call to create networks of volunteer translators and interpreters, to supply a consistent standard of work at the local and world level, in the framework of international social forums.

Key words: ECOS, volunteer work, translation, interpreting, solidarity.

Introduction

Starting with a presentation of our association, *ECOS, Traductores e intérpretes por la solidaridad*, created in the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Granada in 1998, we aim to set forth our vision of social commitment in translation and interpreting, outlining it from the viewpoint of its conceptual and ethical framework, and defining a profile of its participants. We consider that community interpreting and volunteer work should not be confused, and though by origin we work in a limited geographical ambit, we conceive our work in the context of necessary collaboration with similar volunteer organisations, both Spanish and international, as enumerated in the present article. Lastly we treat the relation between social and didactic commitments in translation, and especially in interpreting, with the aim of substituting the concept of “producing” translators and interpreters for the market, by that of training inter-lingual and inter-cultural mediators for society. Working on these principles, we conclude by calling for the creation, or consolidation, of networks of voluntary translators and interpreters contributing to communication between the actors of the emerging world social movements born in recent years in Porto Alegre, and expressed today in a growing number of social forums at the local, regional and world level.

What we understand by community interpreting

Given that terminology is treated in other articles in the present monographic issue, we shall say only that in this article we understand as “community interpreting” the mode of interpreting which Anne Corsellis (1997) defined for the United Kingdom as “public service interpreting,” *a generic term which, for us – though now perhaps misleading –*

covers the legal, health and local government services which include social services, housing, environmental health and education welfare.”

We are aware that in community interpreting there appear factors which are determinant and affect production, such as emotional content, hostile or polarized surroundings, created stress, the power relation between the participants, and the degree of responsibility of the interpreter - in many cases more than extreme; even the life of the other person depending, in many cases, on his work.

Volunteer work in translation and interpreting is not community interpreting

Having outlined the concept of community interpreting, and underlined the fact that social interpreters respond to a growing social need in modern multi-cultural societies, their role being of vital importance if access to essential public services is not to be restricted or conditioned by linguistic or cultural barriers, it is indispensable to note that this must be remunerated work, done by specialised professionals.

We should like to note that there is a great difference between “community interpreting” and “volunteer work in translation and interpretation.” However, as appears from several studies conducted at the University of Granada as to what persons perform tasks of community interpreting in places such as police stations, hospitals and immigrant aid institutions in Granada, it often happens that these tasks are performed by volunteer workers, be they professionals or persons who have received no specific training.

What these studies show, apart from the negation or relativisation of the need for linguistic mediation, is the wide range of people who perform functions of SI (simultaneous interpreting) - NGO volunteers, relatives or friends of the persons involved, persons working for the INEM (the Spanish State Unemployment Agency), cultural mediators, or personnel from different institutions who speak certain languages. In all cases, with the possible exception of the police at certain times of the year, and certain linguistic combinations, it is a question of untrained volunteer personnel, called on to “lend a hand.” (Martin y Abril: 2002)

It has previously been noted that these persons who, while not professionals, do exercise as such, must face certain determinant factors in interpreting, such as stress, pressure, emotion of the moment, etc. So that we agree with the authors just cited, that it is hard to guarantee reliable service under these conditions.

In the association ECOS, Translators and Interpreters for Solidarity, we perform volunteer work of translation and interpreting for NGOs, social forums and other non-profit organisations with affinities to the philosophy of our organisation. In no case would we wish to accept a continuous role in the performance of a service which ought to be supplied by professionals under contract.

In other words, we do not intend that the voluntary nature of work performed should serve as an excuse for the creation of what is beginning to be called a “third sector,” which would amount to the utilisation of volunteer work and non-profit organizations together with private initiative to organise, at low cost, services which in our opinion ought to be supplied by the public sector, the only one capable of the coverage necessary.

The intervention of an interpreter in a police station, for example, *constitutes one of the fundamental rights of the arrested person, covered by article 520 of the Spanish Criminal Trial Law* (Feria: 1999). Community interpreting, apart from being a right of

the person benefited by it, be it in a hospital, a prison or a refugee aid organization, is also a difficult profession, which requires specific training, and remuneration in accordance with this specific role. Pöchhacker (1999) notes precisely the institutional character, and the fact that public services supply it. Herein, precisely, lies the difference between community interpreting and volunteer work. Both activities offer translation and interpreting services for the good of the community, but this is all they should have in common. The translation and interpreting volunteer work performed by Ecos and other similar associations for NGOs, social forums, etc, serve the public interest in a different manner, and never to foment the privatisation or “voluntarisation” of public services.

Unfortunately, the present reality of the situation of community interpreters is very different from that of other professionals in translation and interpreting. In the words of Ozolins (2000), *unlike conference interpreting, which basically grew as a profession-driven field, liaison interpreting has grown as essentially an institution-driven field, with important consequences for status and professional issues.*

In many cases, however, the institutions are unaware of the need to engage professional translators and interpreters, or are content to settle for the quality of work performed by volunteers without specific training. In circumstances of this sort, it is debatable whether it is right to use volunteers trained in translation and interpreting, to create a later need for hiring of professionals. Thus, for example, in the Hospital Costa del Sol in Málaga and a medical centre in Nerja, volunteer interpreter groups have been created to supply the communication needs of foreign patients (Pascual: 1998). It is not clear, however, whether this service will continue to be voluntary and free of charge in the future, or if training is to be demanded for acceptance as a volunteer interpreter in these services.

Volunteer work in translation and interpreting

There are many associations and organisations that use the services of volunteer translators and interpreters both in Spain and internationally. Ecos is not the only association of this type in the Iberian peninsula. *Traductores sen Fronteiras*, an organization founded in 1995 by translators and interpreters at the University of Vigo, performs similar work (Mascuñán and Cruces: 2003, in press). In its web page, *Traductores sen Fronteiras* underlines that, in order not to usurp a professional role, its members should accept translation and interpreting work only from other NGOs.

Meanwhile, refugee and immigrant aid organisations such as *CEAR*, *ACCEM*, and *Málaga Acoge* perform, among other types of volunteer work, that of linguistic support in translation and interpreting.

In certain Spanish information sites on volunteer work, such as *Haces Falta*, whose address appears in the Internet references at the end of this article, we also find advertisements seeking volunteer translators and interpreters for various languages. Similarly, various independent news media groups such as *Indymedia* carry mailing lists of translators for most combinations of languages. In all these cases it would seem that the work of an NGO specialising in translation and interpreting services has to include that of making other NGOs of wider or different ambit aware of the need of covering translation and interpreting services with persons who know something more than languages. In the world of volunteer work, just as in the professional world, there is often only a vague awareness of the work of the translator or interpreter, and the

requirements for proper performance of this work. A simple example may serve: just as organizations such as *Doctors Without Borders* or *Doctors of the World* would not think of sending veterinarians or biologists to Africa to vaccinate children with the pretext that it is, after all, only volunteer work, adequate training cannot be treated as being optional in volunteer services of translation and interpreting.

Meanwhile there are several associations of volunteer translators and interpreters for international events. *Babels*, for example, is an international volunteer translation and interpreting network, created in September 2002 for the European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence, to perform interpreting in Social Forums and other international events. Here we wish to congratulate this network, with which Ecos has modestly collaborated in the second edition of the ESF held in 2003, for its huge effort to bring together nearly a thousand volunteer interpreters, covering more than 50 seminars at once with simultaneous interpreting into 5 languages at each seminar - a total of 19 languages. This is no doubt an unprecedented, hugely complex initiative, whose magnitude is more apparent when we note that the persons in charge, working disinterestedly for several months before the ESF, are largely persons from outside the world of interpreting. Inevitably there were organizational errors, though many were corrected between the two first editions of the ESF, overall evaluation of the work being very positive. One aim of Ecos is to put its resources at the service of a net such as *Babels*, with whose aims we are in essential agreement. In the short time we have worked with them we have seen some possible lines of future collaboration to improve interpreting systems in forums, which we intend to study and develop.

Moreover, in the web page of the World Social Forum, volunteer translators and interpreters have been in demand since the first edition in 2001. This page features translations signed by collaborators of ATTAC Chile, among others.

International Conference Volunteers is another NGO offering aid to organizers of non-profit projects, for which it recruits, trains and coordinates volunteers at the international level. *ICV* puts organizers and volunteers in contact, especially for social, humanitarian, ecological and scientific conferences. Its web page underlines that "it is important to note that *ICV* works exclusively for non-profit conferences."

Social commitment in translation and interpreting

The social commitment we develop in the association, and with which we are identified both ideologically and at the volunteer level, answers to the following definition: to work for and with people who require translation and interpreting services, within the ambit of NGOs and other social organizations, which, lacking economic means, cannot afford professional translation and interpreting. This definition may seem ambiguous or hide another motive - the fear of trespassing upon the ground of professional translators who ought to be performing this work.

However our volunteer work is limited to the field of people who need an ever more indispensable service such as translation and interpreting, and cannot afford it. Thus we wish to dispel any doubt as to possible unfair competition, the persons we address being totally excluded from the professional translation and interpreting market. In this sense our work is like that of volunteers who supply medicines to third-world communities completely outside the trade network known as globalization.

Another point to be underlined is our present concept, at the local level, of less favoured social groups. In this class we wish to include, not only immigrants and NGOs, two of the most mentioned sectors in the volunteer-work field, but all those groups or individuals who due to personal or social circumstances cannot accede to the services offered by institutions, or are simply unable to exercise their right to communicate freely (in this case by oral or written document) because of the impediment of expressing themselves in an unknown or imperfectly known language.

All this is to be kept in mind, in each volunteer job performed by Ecos members in society. We may, for example, mention two cases that came up in 2002-2003. One was a request from a section of the SAS (Andalusian Health Service) for association members, or students at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting at Granada, to perform tasks of translation (mainly in administrative work) and interpreting (with foreigners coming to the SAS health services). In this case we naturally had to reject the request, considering that the only time suitable for this would be at the beginning of the service - that is, to create the need for later establishment of remunerated jobs, within a brief period (six months at most). As was to be expected, they did not accept this view, and our volunteer work with SAS did not even have a happy beginning.

A second example, in which we did work in 2002-2003, is the case of the translation of the *Responsible Consumer Guide*, edited, in its Spanish version, by several NGOs in Granada, including the Human Rights Association of Andalusia (Granada section), AKIBA (association of support for Black Africa), etc. These associations came to Ecos with a concrete project: to extend the publication of the guide to other languages such as English, French and German, for later electronic or paper publication. This guide is a non-profit operation setting forth the lines followed by fair trade, environmental conservation and sustainable development, among other matters. All much in line with the current of *another world is possible*, so that we find it highly suitable for collaboration.

Another important aspect: who participates in all these tasks performed by the association? In the first place, it must be said that the association Ecos is not composed exclusively of students. It is open to all interested members of the community existing in the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting; and in fact, during the school year 2002-2003 we have enjoyed the collaboration of many members of the teaching staff in our activities.

All these persons evaluate, contribute and opine on all the proposals presented, and collectively decide on how our activities are to be performed. Meanwhile, each person is free to participate in a given task of translation, or to attend the talks held by our association.

Our aim is to work for a better quality of life for certain social sectors, and to struggle against the injustices of the established system. Thus each one of our members makes his disinterested contribution in our field, with a criterion of helping people, and of enriching our preparation as professionals and citizens. It would be pointless to work for a multinational in the translation of some text, as this would undermine our own groundwork, and cross the line into unfair competition with fellow translators and interpreters who are making a living in the profession for which we have been, or are being trained.

We think the struggle for a fairer world involves us too, and that we should contribute to it with our work, it being ever more indispensable in this era of communication and, we may add, of disinformation. Our work as a link between communication and information is an instrument we hope to refine, with the *little big power* which is the knowledge of different languages and cultures.

Of course, no pressure is exerted on anyone working within our association. We believe our principles are clear. Those who work with us are giving effort and time. We respond not in financial terms, but in those of personal and intellectual contact aimed at comprehension and extension of our own values. These include criticism of working conditions in our field which do not seem to be fair or acceptable in terms of remuneration and working hours. Similarly we denounce unfair competition, especially that of large firms aimed at exploiting the work of translators and interpreters who earn their living at their profession.

Thanks to this work we share, we also collaborate in activities that increase the experience of the students themselves. For each one of our commissions there is a person in charge of managing the distribution and delivery of the translations; then a series of translators who work from or towards their B languages and C languages; and finally a number of revisers – this is where the teaching staff come into play, being more capacitated to perform this phase in the production line of a professional translation. The work on the translation of the *Responsible Consumer's Guide* has followed this model, similar to that used for group work in translation agencies. We try to involve as many persons as possible in each job, though this increases problems of coordination - so that the individual translator's burden will be small, our volunteers often having little free time to spare.

In principle, most of the work that comes to Ecos is from the local area of Granada. However, some comes from out of the province, such as a translation of the statutes of an anti-cancer group from Madrid. If we have decided to focus on the local level, it is because our structures are small, while other localities can well create their own groups. In such a case a network of cooperation may grow up, enriching experiences at the inter-regional level.

The above does not exclude occasional work with social groups that send proposals through Internet, offering jobs along the lines described above.

Our work is heterogeneous. We aim at versatility in our activities and collaborators, to afford us entry into diverse areas both of the market and of official administrations, and to show the need for translation and interpreting in a social sector largely neglected by the statistics. However, our aim is to give impetus to effective, rather than merely latent social organization, so as not to be used as a stop-gap solution of the type favoured by the interests of the dominant neo-liberal model of globalisation.

Present lines of work

The lines of work developed by Ecos in 2002-2003 have been in three principal areas:

1. Translation of texts for other social organisations
2. Organization of awareness-raising talks on contemporary social questions
3. Working together with other social groups in Granada in the Social Forum
Another World is Possible

The first area has been explained with examples; we note only that it affords experience in team work outside the jobs performed in class, or in professional situations where our members have worked.

The second area has been a dense one, some 10 talks having been organised on different matters of substance since we began to work as an association about November 2002. These fall into different groups: the international situation (Iraq and Middle East); those devoted to the Social Forum of Porto Alegre held in January 2003 (video and discussion of the speeches of Galeano, Chomsky Ziegler and Roy, among others); and those devoted to contemporary questions and of present interest to the association (fair trade, General Agreement on the Services Industry).

Lastly, Ecos has been present at meetings and activities of the Social Forum of Granada since 2003, in cooperation with other associations oriented to the idea that *another world is possible* – more just, more peaceful, more equal.

Training translators and interpreters for society

Our concept of volunteer work in translation and interpreting goes with a new concept of teaching in these professions. If we accept that volunteer work for groups and persons outside the professional translation and interpreting market is a social need, then it requires a training aimed not just at training professionals for the reality of the labour market, that is in remunerated activities, but also for the specific communicative requirements of volunteer situations. In this sense, we believe that the concept of “training translators and interpreters for the market” must give way to training professionals for society. We are aware that society and the market are concepts which, in the dominant thought system, are ever more interchangeable, especially as neo-liberal globalization is leading us from a market economy to a market society. But we wish to maintain a clear distinction between them. To deny that the market is part of society would be ingenuous; but society is something more than a space where goods and services are exchanged under the rule of money. Meanwhile we cannot decline to prepare students for their experience in the market; but we do try to broaden their range to prepare them, too, for activities less “bread-and-butter” in the economic sense, but valuable in the personal one. After all, are we educating merely professionals, or citizens?

Focusing more on our own ambit, there are several authors who, in translation and interpreting studies, have pointed to the indissoluble link between language and ideology and its implications in translation (Hatim and Mason, Venutti, Von Flotow, Baker). In the words of Hatim and Mason (1995:206)

...translators and other professionals, who deal with language amid such complex social relations, cannot cease to be aware of the linguistic implications of the fact that the capacity to use certain genres, discourses, etc. becomes an instrument of power.

The genres and discourses dominant in the market, including the most apparently formal or technical ones, are imbued with the ideology of the dominant discourse. Thus, to prepare students to translate outside the market as well, entails a pedagogical labour incorporating other discourse. Thus, a student accustomed to interpreting speeches by the European commissioner Pascal Lamy will have difficulties in interpreting those of José Bové, though both apparently treat of the same matters. Another, habituated to translate franchise contracts, will perhaps fail to encounter the right lexical options to

translate a text on awareness of fair trade – on account not so much of terminology as of ideological barriers. When it comes to taking lexical decisions the students, oriented by their teachers, are guided by the idiomatic principle of what “sounds right” – which, in the case of the most markedly ideological discourse, is too often confused with what the single thought system understands as being politically correct.

Hatim and Mason (1995:206) also note:

The linguistic decisions that we take systematically inevitably rest upon a classification of reality, previous and ideological. The content of what we do with language is a reflection of ideology, on both the lexical-semantic and the grammatical-syntactic level.

The teacher collaborating in this article has often noted students’ reticence in using certain words or expressions ideologically marked in a sense contrary to the habitual one, so that a discourse advocating rupture with the present model of society may be translated, in the best of cases, along reformist lines in the target language. In a recent class it was observed how, in exercises of consecutive interpreting, two students interpreting the same discourse omitted the same datum, in this case an historical reference. The crimes of the Nazis being enumerated, the text referred to the massacre of six million Jews, the fifth part of the Polish population, and 25 million Russians. The last figure was omitted in both cases, one student affirming he had doubted what he had heard, though it is just as historical as the other two. Such an example shows to what extent two speakers may find themselves in unequal conditions with an interpreter, according to whether they adhere to the dominant line of thought, and version of history.

Obviously, not all the responsibility for such shortcomings can be placed on the teaching institutions. But, when the single thought system finds uninhibited expression in all areas (communications media, but also university lecture halls, and supposedly scientific books on economics - in reality charged with ideology, as indicated by Stiglitz), we may ask whether the time has not come for critical thought, as well, to have a space in the teaching material to be translated or interpreted, and in the form of approach to this task.

We shall here only point out certain features which ought to have a place in the training of linguistic and cultural mediators for society, and not just for the market. Training ought to include a greater diversity - in text genre, in ideological focus, in accents in the case of interpretation (greater emphasis on accents used in countries once colonized, or those of persons who use the former colonial language to communicate in international forums or events), in communicative situations, etc. Meanwhile, practical training ought to include more reflection on the factors that condition this practice. Translation and interpreting techniques are not a reality isolated from the historical, social, economic, political and cultural situations in which they mediate. Thus the teaching of translation and interpreting has to be multi-disciplinary in the broadest sense of the term. A more reflective and critical apprenticeship is fostered by teaching methods such as problem-based ones (Palomares, 2003: 407-410), which favour discussion and debate between students by means of tutored group work.

In this new approach, we see great value in some contributions of general character on pedagogy, such as those of Donald A. Schön (1992), who proposes a new design of teaching of these professions, based on the reflective practicum. Or those of Edgar Morin (1999) who questions the trend to fragmentation of knowledge, or closed compartments, and proposes a sort of teaching whose mission would be “de transmettre,

non du pur savoir, mais une culture qui permet de comprendre notre condition et de nous aider à vivre; elle est en même temps de favoriser une façon de penser ouverte et libre” (Morin, 1999: 11). The same author criticises hyper-specialisation, which “empêche de voir le global (qu’elle fragmente en parcelles) ainsi que l’essentiel (qu’elle dissout)” (op. cit.: 13-14); its fundamental ideas being summed up in the following very thought-provoking passage:

La pensée qui découpe, isole, permet aux spécialistes et experts d’être très performants dans leurs compartiments et de coopérer efficacement dans des secteurs de connaissance non complexes, notamment ceux concernant le fonctionnement des machines artificielles ; mais la logique à laquelle ils obéissent étend sur la société et les relations humaines les contraintes et les mécanismes inhumains de la machine artificielle et leur vision déterministe, mécaniste, quantitative, formaliste, ignore, occulte ou dissout tout ce qui est subjectif, affectif, libre, créateur. (Morin, 1999 : 15)

For all the foregoing reasons, we view recordings made at round tables and conferences of regional or world social forums, as being of great use in the training of interpreters. In Granada this was put into practice with recordings made at the III World Social Forum of 2003, and will soon be extended with those made at the II European Social Forum. These are digital camera recordings which, with little investment in technical resources and with suitable microphones and accessories, afford us audiovisual material of a more than acceptable quality, which, once edited and transcribed, has huge didactic potential in the apprenticeship of interpreting. Such material has also the advantage of not colliding with the limitation of copyright to be found in private congresses - given that the authors of the discourse heard at social forums seek precisely the greatest possible audience for the ideas and information they bring there - for which the commercial communications media have little room. ECOS already has a DVD including recordings of eight round tables at the Forum of Porto Alegre 2003, now in phase of transcription, and including more than 10 hours of speeches in French, English, Spanish and Portuguese. This is, of course, at the disposal of any centres that may desire to use it for teaching purposes.

Conclusion

In the association *ECOS, Translators and Interpreters for Solidarity*, our view of volunteer work precludes any activity that may afford the public administrations a pretext for neglecting public services they are obliged to give. We perform services of community interpreting only under the same conditions as we do any sort of translation or interpreting - that is, limited to persons and groups of “recognised economic insolvency” who, without volunteer work, cannot cover their linguistic mediation needs.

Meanwhile, we consider it indispensable to broaden the concept of professional ethics in these times of neo-liberal globalization, which deepens the inequalities between peoples and within them. We can no longer limit our aims merely to defending decent working conditions and rejecting the intrusion of non-qualified persons into the profession. It would be hypocritical to bemoan the price per word paid by such-and-such a company, or the size of the interpreter’s booths in this or that convention centre, while feeling no scruples at working for those who organise exploitation, misery and war in this world. We give no moral lessons to anyone, there being not overmuch work to go round, and not all professionals can pick and choose. But we do wish to open up a space for other forms of communication between those who have been excluded from the present concentration of power, or those who wish to struggle against it. To paraphrase García Márquez, the globalisers have their own people who communicate

for them, and who are well remunerated. The people being globalised can depend only on our solidarity, on the networks we can create from any point on the globe. In Ecos, an NGO that works for a world in which NGOs will no longer be necessary, we are just one small knot in this net. But we are working to connect with others, and to overcome the linguistic barriers between the ever more numerous people who insist that *another world is possible*. We should like to add only that, as could hardly be otherwise, another kind of interpreting is also possible and necessary - and another kind of training of translators and interpreters.

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