

An interview with Dr. Franz Pöchhacker on interpreting research and training

Interviewer: RAN XU
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Franz Pöchhacker is Associate Professor of Interpreting Studies in the Centre for Translation Studies at the University of Vienna. He has worked as a conference and media interpreter and published articles and monographs on various domains of interpreting. He has co-edited *The Interpreting Studies Reader* (London/New York: Routledge 2002) and published an introductory textbook entitled *Introducing Interpreting Studies* (London/New York: Routledge 2004). He is also the editor, with Minhua Liu, of *Interpreting: International Journal of Research and Practice in Interpreting* (John Benjamins, Amsterdam) and serves as Associate Editor of the 'Benjamins Translation Library' series (John Benjamins, Amsterdam). Dr. Pöchhacker was invited to give a talk titled "Researching Interpreting: Focus on Methodology" at the Centre for Translation Studies, University of Leeds, where this short interview took place.

Ran Xu: *What do you see as the current trends of interpreting research and what determines these trends? In what possible directions do you see the future trends developing?*

Franz Pöchhacker: It depends on the time frame that we are looking at. When you say 'current trends', this could also mean to say 'what's hot nowadays in interpreting studies'. But I would like to step back and look at the long-standing trends. The major shift that is extremely noticeable is the move beyond international conference settings as a focus of interest in research on interpreting. It started to happen in the 1990s, looking not only at international conference interpreting and specifically at simultaneous interpreting, but also taking seriously other domains of interpreting, like court interpreting and interpreting in hospital as well as many other settings. I think that is the most fundamental and a recent trend in the field of interpreting studies. It has also been accompanied by several shifts in both theory and methodology. A purely cognitive or cognitive science perspective was ideally suited to an explanation of the cognitive process of simultaneous interpreting, but once

we are looking at conversational interaction, interpreting research based on cognitive psychology does not tell us much about what is going on in these situations. So the shift from the cognitive scientific models and methods towards more sociological methods was associated with this change or this expansion of the field of view. That also meant that the typical methodologies that used to be more quantitative or experimental underwent a shift towards more qualitative analysis, discourse-based analysis.

One separate trend is generated by technological progress. New forms of practising interpreting, especially remote interpreting, have had a major impact. So I see a major research interest in looking at interpreting as practice with new technology. There are other researches that have a regional or geographic or linguistic origin, and that could also be seen as a trend that new language combinations are coming to the fore as an object of study.

The future trends would be almost like developments extending from a very strong nucleus, which I think originally was a very tightly knit set of parameters: specific type of interpreting, specific mode of interpreting, certain language combinations and certain regional centres where interpreting was practised. It was a small core and it is almost as if this core has been expanding in all directions. I could not really say that there is one particular direction for the future researches, but there will be more developments, for instance, towards more sophisticated, cognitive scientific methods. I know that Barbara Moser-Mercer in Geneva is now working together with neuroscientists to study the intricacies of language in the brain in conference interpreting. That trend is continuing. There will also be more discourse analytical studies, more sociological interaction-oriented studies. All these various new developments in new settings will be on-going. It would be hard to see the whole field moving only in one direction.

RX: *Generally speaking, the market need for conference interpreters is shrinking against the current financial background. Meanwhile, interpreting research itself has been experiencing a shift towards, for example, community interpreting, an area where professional training is still lacking. What are the implications for interpreting training schools? Does it pose a threat to professional training, in other words a de-professionalization of the trade?*

FP: I think the fundamental issue here would be the appreciation for the complexity of interpreting, also in the settings beyond international conferences. If people believe—or are made to believe—that the real challenge of

interpreting is only in simultaneous interpreting and the rest is easy and can be done by any bilingual, as current and everyday practice seems to show, then I think training institutions would be in trouble.

There are enough studies to show that interpreting in dialogic and triadic settings is incredibly complex and challenging. Even people with a conference interpreting background like Margareta Bowen said many years ago that interpreting in a community setting is at least as challenging as sitting in the booth in an international conference. It is just that the type of challenge is a different one.

If the interpreting training community aims for professionalism in that activity, there will even be a growing need for training, but maybe not so much for an expansion of training conference interpreters. Training schools would definitely remain in business—if not grow—if society agrees with them that the kinds of interpreting that happen nowadays in multilingual societies deserve to be practiced at the highest possible professional level. This is ultimately a political decision.

RX: *In China, the interpreting market is still growing, and it has given rise to the boom in interpreting training schools and MA programmes for conference interpreters. All of a sudden, interpreting research has become popular as well. Do you see China as taking on the lead in interpreting training and possibly research?*

FP: I certainly see tremendous potential in research and training in China, where there are very active and prominent research centres. I would acknowledge though that China is nowadays faced with a great need for not only trainees and graduates, but also qualified trainers of interpreting. There is a real bottleneck. If the country wants to expand the number of available professional interpreters so quickly, it has to draft language teachers without any experience in interpreting into the classroom to teach interpreting to students who very often do not have a very high level of English skills, because everything is happening so fast and so quickly. Then I think there is a risk involved that we create a generation of graduates of interpreting training programmes who are not trained under ideal circumstances for the reasons that I've alluded to.

On the other hand, I don't know any solution to it. If you have a strong need, you have to try to fill this need in whichever way possible. In some other countries, interpreting training also became almost like a fashion. Any university wants to have an interpreting training programme. So that is

where I believe, in free societies, some level of regulation might be useful. A state ministry of education should be more sensible and realistic about the need and expand the interpreting training programmes a bit more slowly, but with more quality. Maybe getting teachers who have experience in interpreting would make sense in the long run. The worst-case scenario would be that we expand the pool of interpreters very quickly and they haven't been trained under ideal circumstances. In ten years' time, when all these people have saturated the market, China might face the situation that certain countries are facing nowadays in Europe where interpreters for English are no longer that necessary.

Will the need for interpreters really continue rising the way it has in the past ten years? I don't know. If we expand quickly and saturate the market, then it may develop in a different direction, or at least stagnate. Then we will not have any chance to make the interpreters even better and more professional, because we have produced too many of them and too quickly.

RX: *As an interpreting scholar, you have extensive experience in many disciplines of interpreting research. Do you have any specific suggestions for young interpreting researchers? In the long run, should we be as broad as possible, covering different disciplines, or as narrow and specialised as possible?*

FP: On the level of the interpreting studies community, luckily we do not have to make these choices. The community is large enough and develops on its own. It is self-regulating. Maybe within a centre with limited funds, we have to say what we should opt for. But in the community as a whole, there is no need to say 'we' should focus on this or that.

On the individual student level, my advice is usually to capitalize on their strengths. I would suggest that they try to find out what particular interests, capabilities and skills would be available to them.

Finally, in terms of research training, that question does indeed come up: when we give a course on research training, should it be "specialised" or "as broad as possible"? I think we should opt for the latter. At the University of Vienna, we have a research training course that introduces students to survey design, semi-structured interviews and quantitative analysis, etc., giving them an overview of the various methods that they could then adopt for their particular research topic. New publications are also helpful in guiding students if they want to opt for a certain methodology. In terms of methodology, I think it is useful to keep it broad.