Defining the Dialogue Interpreter’s Role from the Perspective of Turn-taking

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Abstract. Basing on the special features of the interpreting operating model, the current view towards the interpreter’s role is found no longer suitable for accurately describing the function and the role the interpreter plays in the process. Therefore, this paper chooses the role of the interpreter as its interested topic from the perspective of discourse analysis—turn-taking, in an effort to reshape the interpreter’s role. This paper will focus on analyzing the collected data to clarify how the interpreter functions in dealing with the turns that emerging in the conversation. The data analysis is expected to illustrate the dynamic and active role of the interpreter in the sophisticated process of interpreting as indicated by the theoretical framework proposed, and dilute the low fixed status as well as the over-simplified and marginalized image of the interpreter.

Keywords: discourse analysis, turn-taking, interpreter’s role, dialogue interpreting

1. Introduction
As a form of mediating across boundaries of languages and culture, interpreting has been instrumental in human communication since earliest times. However, it was not until the course of the twentieth century, with the advent of the technology necessary for simultaneous interpreting and the huge increase in international communication, that interpreting gained wide recognition as a profession. Serving as a booming industry, interpreting acquires its initiation and burgeoning development to the expanding cross-cultural communication around the world. Nowadays, interpreting is gaining popularity and attracting attention with the ever accelerating economic globalization, cultural exchanges

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and diversification. “Attribute to its active involvement in social events ranging from state-to-state affairs to inter-corporate businesses, interpreting is no longer a fresh thing to people from all walks of life” (Baker, 1998: 42). Apart from that, interpreting is also a mutually influential process. Interpreters and translators play a vital role in helping deal with the language difficulties and cultural barriers, thus generally serving as a facilitator in shaping a “global village” (Hu Wenzhong, 1999: 9). The 21st century, especially during the period of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and 2010 Shanghai World Expo holding in China, has witnessed the surge of interest of interpreting in China. This craze has aroused a boom of interpreting training and unremitting efforts at interpreting researches that aimed at “re-examining the theoretical foundation and knowledge base” (Roy, 1993:346), among which the role of the interpreter has gained significant attention. Interpreting, as an immediate oral translation transferring messages between speakers of different language, is one of the oldest human activities. However, the interpreter has long been marginalized and just gained professional status recently (Hu Gengshen, 2000). The present paper on the interpreter is carried on in an attempt to redefine the role of the interpreter from the perspective of a basic feature of discourse analysis—turn-taking.

2. Traditional Views on the Role of the Interpreter
Interpreting, for a long time, has been regarded as the sub-discipline under the study of translation. Therefore, many people hold the view that “translation” also refers to the interpreting event, which is reflected in some authorized definitions given by translation scholars. Jakobson, in his book entitled “Inter-lingual Translation”, defines translation as “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (1966: 233), understanding the translation process as a substitution of “messages in one language not for separate code-units but for entire messages in some other language” (1966:233). Toury’s Target Text-oriented Studies states that translation is “taken to be any target-language utterance which is presented or regarded as such within the target culture, on whatever grounds” (1985: 20). Brislin, R.W. sees translation as the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language to another, whether the languages are in written or oral form…or whether one or both languages are based on signs. (2004: 12) The definitions mentioned above include interpreting, yet each involves different conceptual dimensions, thus lots of misunderstandings and prejudices, oversimplifications against the role of the translator would naturally shaped the way people view at the role of the interpreter.

Descriptions of the interpreter’s role have undergone substantial changes from the extreme transparent person or invisible man defined at the very beginning since interpreting has been regarded as the most promising and important field work. Interpreters are “performers” who are constantly making split-second decisions and taking communicative risks; consequently they typically experience higher stress levels while “on the job” than most translators (Gile 1995a: 111-14). There are many misunderstandings of the interpreter’s
roles both within and outside of the interpreting circle, representing by the nicknames given: “a necessary evil”, “walking bilingual dictionary”, “automatic language converter”, and a “polyglot” and so on. In fact, these nicknames have done more harm than good to the interpreters, minimizing the role of the interpreters as well as oversimplifying the interpreting process, diminishing the interpreter’s efforts of promoting the success communication for all the parties involved. The role of interpreter is far more complex. Professional interpreters often describe themselves as “a middle man”. Regarding one of the nickname “necessary evil”, it means necessary for the interaction but evil when misunderstanding and setback are caused.

3. Discourse Analysis as a Theoretical Framework
In his book Approaches to Discourse, Schiffrin (1994) describes six linguistic approaches to discourse analysis: speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and variation analysis. According to Schiffrin’s explanation, these approaches attempts to answer the question, “How do we organize language into units that are larger than sentences? How do we use language to convey information about the world, about ourselves as well as our social relationships?” (Schiffrin, 1994: viii). These questions are similar to the situation of interpreting process, that is, how does the interpreter organize language into units that are larger than sentences? And how does the interpreter use language to convey information about the communication, the primary interlocutors and the relationship among the parties involved?

Generally speaking, throughout the history of discourse analysis, the study of discourse can fall into two tendencies. The first one focuses on analyzing how people control their discourse behavior concerning their cultural backgrounds and their communicative goal during the talk. Labov, Gumperz and Schiffrin all belong to this category. Anthropologist Gumperz argues that speakers in a conversation are engaged in an ongoing and immediate process of assessment of those purposes. He also proposes that interlocutor must have to maintain involvements in an action due to both the linguistic and sociocultural reasons. According to Gumperz, messages are produced and understood partially or wholly in very different ways because people were affected by their own social and cultural contexts, thus took different interpretations of what is said and done. Gumperz’s student Deborah Tannen extends the interactional sociolinguistic approach to discourse analysis. Deborah Tannen’s approach is characterized by the following points (Roy, 2000: 16):

1. recording naturally occurring conversations;
2. identifying segments in which communication may seem to flounder or be troublesome;
3. looking for patterned differences in signaling meaning that could account for trouble;
4. playing the recording, or segment of it back to participants to elicit their spontaneous interpretations and reaction, and also, perhaps later,
eliciting their responses to the researcher’s interpretations;

(5) playing segments of the interaction to other members of the cultural groups represented by the speaker to discern patterns of interpretation.

“Gumperz’s analysis of brief utterances located within a social scene and Tannen’s approach more precisely defines discourse studies’ concentration on naturally occurring conversations which involve social and cultural factors” (Roy, 2000: 16). The other tendency of discourse analysis aims to discover explicit rules for the management of specific conversational problems, which providing a framework for going beyond a mere structural description of an interpreted event to a forceful scrutiny of turn-taking as experienced by the participants, as well as the phenomena like simultaneous turn-taking. This kind of research often considers people involved in the conversation as secondary when a conversational event is in progress, in an effort to construct generalized models of conversation categorizing conversations as systematic exchanges of turns and regard talk as being independent of who are talking and the content of the conversation. Erving Goffman focuses on social organization of the way people manifest their involvement with each other. Goffman’s research is vital to the description of the primary interlocutors’ role, such as that of the interpreter. Moreover, Goffman also explores how individuals represent themselves to each other as they involve in the communication process. According to Wadensjo (1998) and Edmundson (1986), the term “participation framework”, proposed by Goffman, has recently been introduced to the studies of interpreting. During the communication process, each individual’s role performance depends on how all the spoken parties relate to each other. In this sense, the performance of an interpreter’s role, while recognizing expected or assumed norms which may or may not differ from the actual role performance within the interpreted event, allows the researcher to observe the performance and to notice whether it matches to the prescribed role.

To summarize, the contribution of the discourse analysis is the application of critical thought to social context and the uncovering of potential rules of interaction within the socially dominant together with other discourses. Turn-taking, being a basic and specific factor in conversation or discourse, has attracted many sociologists and sociolinguists’ attention. They assume that turns occurred and taken by the parties involved in the conversation when they talk, stop and response. However, in real situations, turns do not always occur as one-at-a-time rotation order; meanwhile, some other features like silences, pauses and overlaps do exert influence in conversations.

4. Turn-taking in interpreting.
In the daily dialogues, the primary interlocutors may be politicians, businessmen or women, trades unionists or scientists. They wish to discuss their work but speak different languages, and neither speaks the other’s language well enough for the discussion to be useful. So they call in someone else, who speaks both languages, to explain what each is saying in turn. This general conversational process gives a better idea of what interpreting is all about than a
pat definition such as “immediate oral translation”. Interpreting is about communication. The example given above is simplified to caricature but represents the essence of interpreter’s work, whether they find themselves in a room with two individuals and two languages or in a large conference hall with hundreds of participants and a multiplicity of languages: people who wish to communicate with one another, and who are prevented from doing so by a barrier. Clearly, that barrier is first and foremost linguistics. Hence a definition such as “immediate oral translation” comes into being. Interpreters only exist because of that language barrier, and they must obviously have sufficient linguistic knowledge if they are to translate correctly. However, the barriers to communication, together with the role of the interpreter, are more than that. People from different countries may not only speak different languages but have behind them different bodies of knowledge, different educations, different cultures, and therefore different intellectual approaches. The fact that such differences have to be coped with independent of the language barrier can be easily seen by looking at a hypothetical discussion between an Englishman and an American. If the Englishman litters his comments with cricketing metaphors the American will have difficulty following, and the American in turn will find it easy to wreak revenge by falling back on baseball and American football. Communication difficulties are thus much more than pure translation difficulties. The cultural difficulties referred to above can manifest themselves both economic, social, academic institutions and systems, intellectual concepts or television catchphrases that have no direct equivalent in the language of the person they are addressing, and indeed may be totally unknown—and therefore meaningless—to that person. So the interpreter’s task is to instill meaning into the text for the target audience, if necessary and if possible by providing the requisite explanations or even changing the original speaker’s references, provided this conveys to the audience precisely what the speaker wanted to say. As the basic language transmission mechanism in all the conversation, turn-taking system can also be applied in the dialogue interpreting, which is a special form of conversation. Considering interpreting as a discourse process of turn-taking can help demonstrate that the interpreted conversations are the extension and addition of the principles guiding ordinary daily conversations. The interpreted conversation, with distinct feature of turn-taking, differ itself from that in daily conversations because the two primary interlocutors A and B, for example, do not exchanges turns directly with each other. Rather, A will give the turn to the interpreter, C, and then the turn would be transferred by C to A or B. Successful communication between the primary participants with different language and cultural background in interpreted conversations and the smoothly conduction of turn-taking largely relies on whether the interpreter can adopt effective and reasonable discourse strategies such as offering turns, creating turns, disrupting turns, terminating and accepting turns so as to handle the potential perplex, stagnation, silence or overlapping among the primary interlocutors. Only in this way can help the major participants realize their respective purpose and expectations and avoid conversational
misunderstanding and difficulty. In this manner, specific different types of turns should be mentioned here. According to Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, periods of silence between turns or pauses can be grouped into three kinds: a natural kind of silence expected in any discourse situation; pausing created by participants; and silences created by lag that are no longer than expected, even in interpreting. Meanwhile, overlap, also an ordinary discourse phenomenon, occurs in the interpreting process though there is an expected overlap between one speaker and the interpreter. The interpreter should be flexible at managing the direction of talk and figuring out the signal of each turn. Therefore, even though the interpreted conversation resembles ordinary discourse events in some ways, they do have their own unique features. In the following chapter, the author will illustrate with examples from specific dialogue interpreting cases (downloaded from the internet) the essence of the turn-taking strategies for the interpreter to employ in interpreted conversation.

5. Defining the Dialogue Interpreter’s Role from the Perspective of Turn-taking.

Since an interpreted event is a communicative process involving participants of different languages and cultures facilitated by an interpreter, it is also governed by turn-taking rules, the basic language transfer mechanism universal in all conversations. The interpreter, in the interpreting process, is more than rendering the messages from the source language into the target language, instead, in most circumstances; the interpreter is actively participating in the whole discourse process of communication. This dynamic process helps to redefine the interpreter’s performance in dialogue interpreting, which is totally different from the traditional concepts.

Just as mentioned before, the interpreter’s role has long been considered as merely of passing messages back and forth. On the one hand, many practitioners are highly concerned with confidentiality, neutrality, accuracy, and faithfulness to the original message. They even describe themselves as “the person in the middle”, or “a telephone line” that serve as a bridge to transfer information from one to another faithfully, accurately, and without personal bias. On the other hand, the interpreter is also described as a copy-machine, duplicating exactly what the primary interlocutors said in another language. Under the guidance of this view, people would easily over-simplify the process of interpretation and consider the interpreter to be “invisible” and “transparent”. All of these views regard the original text as the merely standard, and faithfulness as the only guideline for assessment; but actually interpretation is a dynamic communicative process in which the interpreter plays an active role in it. In fact, in the interpreting process, the interpreter is not merely influenced by the linguistic issues, but also various social and cultural elements. It is right to require the interpreter to be accurate in delivering information, however, the fact that interpreting is a dynamic cross-cultural communication process can not be denied. According to Herbert, “the interpreter has the mission to promote a thorough understanding and communication, to promote respect for each other
and to accelerate the approval of consensus between people and people, community and community, people and community. (Herbert, 1984: 3) Hatim and Mason (2001) propose interpreting as a communicative activity, which happens under certain social context rather than a pure language transferring event. This provides a dynamic dimension in exploring interpreting and the interpreter’s role. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, in real interpreted dialogue, the interpreter will actively participate in the conversation by creating turns to avoid the embarrassment or awkwardness when there is a long period of silence or when misunderstanding occurs, even interrupting turns to direct the flow of talk and ignoring turns when overlapping turns occur. It is the interpreter’s involvement at proper times and choices of reasonable turn-taking strategies that the communication in the interpreted dialogue can be perfectly coordinated and go on smoothly. Wadensjo initiated research in the field of dialogue interpreting based on discourse analysis. She pointed out in her 1991 paper that “the dialogue interpreter’s role, no doubt, is a central one in these persons’ mutual communication, due to her unique access to the two languages in which they talk. The interpreter relays the participants’ respective utterances and coordinates the flow of talk between them.” While the conventional concept of the role expectation of the dialogue interpreter lies on the transmission of message, the turn-taking mechanism throw light on how the message is transferred in a proper way and thus serves to promote understanding in the communicative process. Therefore, the dialogue interpreter performs the double role of a message relayer and a coordinator. However, the decision-making over the turns is quite a dilemma for the interpreter in that the interpreter should make correct judgment as to when he or she could take, transfer, create or ignore every second turn at talk. On the one hand, the interpreter is required to transfer the correct and effective information; on the other hand, the interpreter has to intervene to the interaction according to the specific social context and discourse context. Yet one more point is needed to mention here that reconsidering the interpreter’s role in the interpreting process is not a denial of the interpreter’s responsibility of conveying the original information in a complete and accurate way. And raising the interpreter’s knowledge of active involvement in the interpreted dialogue does not mean that the interpreter could go to another extreme of exerting too much interference on the interaction.

6. Conclusion
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Interpreters’ consciousness of their active roles in interpreting will undoubtedly enable them to make appropriate decisions to handle the unexpectedness in interpreting. The interpreter can stop a turn to avoid embarrassed simultaneous talk by two primary speakers, take a turn to ask for a primary speaker’s clarification, prompt a response from a primary speaker, receive a turn from primary speakers, etc.

Therefore, as the only bilingual and bicultural person in interpreting, an interpreter is responsible for dealing with misunderstandings or cultural conflicts between primary speakers. More interpreting researches can be conducted thereafter on such issues as to what extent an interpreter should be involved in the interpreting process, what time should be appropriate for an interpreter to intervene and so on.

In all, the interpreter plays as a special active participant in the communicative process. A qualified interpreter should not only have skillful bilingual capability, profound knowledge, necessary analytical ability and good intercultural self-cultivation, but also excellent discourse communicative ability, various discourse strategies in dialogue, and essential knowledge on turn-taking mechanism. As for the interpreter, only the interpreter realizes he or she is the active participant of the interaction, can the interpreter succeed in solving various communication difficulties and obstacles in interpret flexibly. In this manner, successful communication between the participants of different cultures and backgrounds can be achieved.
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**References**


