

Babels, the Social Forum and the Conference Interpreting Community: overlapping and competing narratives on activism and interpreting in the era of globalisation

Julie Boéri

contact(a)julieboeri.com

ABSTRACT

In a society increasingly polarised by processes of globalisation, and given the shift from national to transnational spheres of action in resisting these processes, there is a pressing need to reflect on the socio-political profile of translators and interpreters, not only in the labour market of the public and private sectors, but also in civil society. Although scholars of translation and interpreting have shown a growing interest in issues of globalisation, ideology, power and agency and have questioned the traditional paradigm of neutrality and invisibility, the current rhetoric of translation as a tool of resistance seems to outstrip the actual power of social change that professional translators are assumed to have at their disposal. Current approaches focus on textual intervention without engaging with the broader role of the interpreter as a social and political actor. They also tend to view the individual translator as the sole motor of change, thus downplaying the collective dimension of both translation and activism. Furthermore, neither interpreting nor translation studies have yet engaged with these issues from a socio-political perspective that goes beyond the notion of mediation and attempts to investigate the role that interpreters play in constructing the social polity. Finally, the literature on socially committed practices of translation and interpreting often lacks critical reflection on the dynamics of resistance and co-optation that are inherent in volunteering and activism.

Adopting a narrative approach, this thesis focuses on Babels, the international network of volunteer interpreters, recognised as one of the most politicised communities of translators and interpreters. Its narrative construction of a specifically activist, critical and self-reflective project of volunteer (mainly simultaneous) interpreting in the context of the Social Forum and the wider Alter-Globalisation Movement is examined as emerging and evolving out of a series of internal and external pressures. These pressures involve implementing the principles of horizontality, deliberation, participation and prefiguration that Babels calls for in the organisational process of the Social Forum, and delivering interpreting efficiently on the day of the event, while not undermining the professional market of conference interpreters. The picture that emerges out of the analysis is one of an open-ended, network-like constellation of competing and overlapping perspectives on activism and interpreting that are available and amenable to be operationalised by individuals not only in Babels, in the context of civil society, but also in professional, and to a certain extent, in scholarly circles. This case-study of activist interpreting ultimately invites practitioners, professionals and scholars to critically reflect on the narratives that circulate in the field in order to bring about greater engagement with the role played by translation and interpreting in an increasingly competitive, polarised and violent society.

KEYWORDS: Activism, alter-globalisation movement, Babels, civil society, collective action, collective identity, community formation, (conference) interpreting, deliberation, ethics of academia, globalisation, horizontality, narrative theory, participation, political

engagement, politics of organisation, prefigurative politics, professional ethics, social change, sociology of the profession, volunteering, (World/European/Mediterranean Social Forum).

Completion of thesis

Place: University of Manchester

Year: 2009

Supervisor: Professor Mona Baker