



Intercultural communication in interpreting: Power and choices

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What is intercultural communication? For many years, scholars have attempted to address this broad topic, yet little has been explored in the realm of interpreting. This is surprising, considering that interpreting is intercultural communication in itself, for by definition interpreter-mediated communication always involves speakers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in dialogue. In my recent book, [*Intercultural communication in interpreting: power and choices*](#) (Routledge, 2021), I tried to address the gap by exploring interpersonal dimensions of intercultural communication in a variety of key interpreting contexts – business, education, law and healthcare – based on the unique perspectives of professional interpreters.

Moving away from the essentialized notion of ‘cultural differences,’ the book focuses on the concept of *small cultures* (Holiday, 1999). According to Holiday, culture can be divided into two different categories in a broad sense: large versus small cultures. Large cultures represent essentialized notions of ethnicity and nation (e.g., British cultures) and may risk overgeneralization and reductionism. As non-essentialist cultures, small cultures relate to ‘small’ entities (e.g., family, hospital, office and relates to ‘the composite of cohesive behaviours in any social grouping’ (p. 237), which is not subservient to large cultures. Each communicative setting in interpreting has structural coherence (e.g., a doctor and a patient in medical interpreting, a judge and a defendant in legal interpreting, or a teacher and a migrant parent in school interpreting) regardless of geographical locations. Small cultures, therefore, represent a useful interpretive framework through which to investigate the critical issue of power and agency in interpreting.

The book focuses on two key questions that remain underexamined in the field of intercultural communication: why does intercultural communication often break down, and how do individual interpreters manage intercultural communication issues? While it is generally believed that interpreter-mediated communication goes smoothly thanks to the bilingual abilities of language professionals, the book highlights that this is not necessarily the case and that, in fact, communication challenges are often associated with power differentials in interpreting, rather than so-called ‘cultural differences.’

Power structures are deeply embedded in interpreting contexts, in which interactions usually occur between an individual equipped with dominant forms of linguistic and cultural proficiency, and a person less proficient in the valued forms of linguistic and cultural capital (Angelelli 2004). Taking legal interpreting as an example, there is almost always a power asymmetry between legal professionals (e.g., judges and lawyers) and laypeople (e.g., the defendant and the accused). This type of relational power structure is not limited to a given communicative context; rather, it is a reflection of broader social structures and power differentials.

Theoretically speaking, interpreters are situated at a neutral space between the two worlds removed from power plays. In reality, however, interpreters, most of whom are from minority backgrounds, are likely to be influenced by the power differentials embedded in interpreting. While power and authority at a macro level may restrict individuals' choices, it is important to note the existence also of 'micro power,' referring to the strategies, tactics, and techniques exercised to bring about temporary changes within communicative interactions (Mason & Ren, 2012). Interpreters hold enormous micro power owing to their bilingual and bicultural abilities. When micro power is exercised, recontextualization may occur, which potentially rebalances the field of power relations (as illustrated in the book).

Thus, the book will have the greatest relevance to readers interested in social justice, power hierarchies and individual agency as ways to respond to systems stacked against minority individuals.

To cite this article, use this format:

Cho, J. (2022). Guest post: Intercultural communication in interpreting: Power and choices.

Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Available from:

<https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2021/12/08/jinhyun-cho-intercultural-communication-in-interpreting>



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