
Introduction to Court Interpreting,
de Holly Mikkelsen. Manchester,
UK & Northampton MA: St.
Jerome Publishing, 2000, 106 pp.

When I finished reading this book my main impression was *what pleasant read!* It seems that the author does not expect the reader to have any knowledge of court interpretation, and thus the book is an easy read for those who are not well acquainted with court interpreting matters. At the same time, I believe that it provides useful reading for those who are trained interpreters, for it gives an overall view of legal procedures and of how the profession is practiced in different countries. It certainly provides a comprehensive perspective on the issues surrounding interpretation in that the main aspects regarding such professional practice are all included.

In order to be really useful any book on court interpreting is expected to provide information on two disciplines: interpreting and legal studies. This book provides insights on both.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides an

interesting and short description of the history of court interpreting. In addition, the role of court interpreters is revisited, taking into account different views on how far the interpreter should go in bridging gaps. Although the writer draws the reader's attention to the impact of culture on language and consequently on the interpreting activity, some reference could have been made to the power relations that can interfere in this type of cross-cultural encounter. This chapter also provides a useful review on the emergence of professional associations in a number of countries. It is an essential chapter for any newcomer to the field.

In Chapter 2, Mikkelsen focuses on the laws and regulations that govern court interpreting in several countries across different continents. The descriptions are brief and clear, and provide for an easy reading. Also included is information about how to become a court interpreter in a number of countries.

Chapter 3 is devoted to legal matters, and is a very informative chapter. The major legal traditions in the world are explained, with an emphasis on the two main ones: Roman Law and Common Law.

Interpreters need to have this kind of basic information, especially if they deal with languages, such as Portuguese and English, which are spoken in countries where the gap resulting from different legal traditions needs to be bridged.

The main focus of Chapter 4 is on criminal and civil procedures under both the Roman and Common Law systems. The chapter draws the interpreter's attention to the fact that s/he must know how cases are processed in court so that s/he may understand the context in which s/he is working and "anticipate misunderstandings that may arise" (p. 34). I believe that the explanations given in this chapter are clear enough, in spite of the fact that it summarizes very briefly the entire procedure followed in both criminal and civil cases. However, I have to admit that having a degree in law myself may have made explanations sound easier than they would really be to the average interpreter who probably does not have a law degree. What I found particularly interesting in this chapter were the two pictures included, one of a South African courtroom and the other of a Japanese courtroom.

Chapter 5 addresses the issue of ethics. The main aspects concerning ethical behavior for interpreters are addressed, such as fidelity, confidentiality, impartiality and professional conduct. The overall prescriptive tone of this chapter is carefully supported by references to specific codes of ethics from different professional associations. The practical guidelines at the end of the chapter alone, make the whole chapter worthwhile. Such practical guidelines are presented in a question-answer format and aim at addressing the "typical questions from novice interpreters" (p. 56). Questions such as "what should I do when I go to court for the first time?" (p. 56), "what should I say when I introduce myself?" (p. 57) and "is it all right if I bring dictionaries to court?" (p. 57) are answered in a clear and direct manner. All the questions are representative of the kind of question interpreters ask themselves when doing their jobs. I would go as far as to say that even professionals who have done interpretation procedures several times would benefit enormously from reading the author's answers. The chapter also includes some role-playing to be acted-out in class.

Interpreting techniques are explored in Chapter 6. As emphasized by Mikkelsen, unlike the previous chapters which examine court interpreting externally, that is “looking at the behaviour of the interpreter with respect to other actors in the courtroom and society at large” (p. 67), this chapter focuses on the internal aspects of the legal interpreter’s work. With the help of short quotations, the author clearly explains the kinds of competence required from an interpreter: not only linguistic but also communicative competence. A description is made of the three modes of interpreting practiced in the judiciary setting, namely consecutive interpreting, simultaneous interpreting and sight translation. When explaining sight translation - the oral translation of a written document - the author reminds interpreters that they must be familiar with both the oral and written forms of the languages with which they are working. This is a very good reminder because laypeople tend to think that interpreters work only with the oral mode. The chapter also explores some ancillary tasks an interpreter may be asked to perform, such as transcribing and

translating recorded conversations, and remote interpreting. The chapter ends with lists of practical exercises that can be done in order to improve specific skills. Such skills include active listening and retention, split attention, restructuring and anticipation.

The information in Chapter 7 is essential for anyone who really wants to go into interpreting, although I was a little disappointed in the quantity and quality of the information provided in this chapter. It explores the types of criminal and civil cases an interpreter is likely to encounter in court. Such cases include traffic and property crimes, sex offenses, divorce and adoption issues, labor relations and business law cases, among others. The second half of the chapter is devoted to the interpreter’s research and preparation. The author provides a list of an interpreter’s basic library, as well as a description of the human and electronic resources needed. Finally, the author reminds the reader that a continuing education is an essential part of the job.

Each chapter’s opening statement clearly states the issues addressed within, and the closing statement lets readers know where

the next chapter is headed. In addition, each chapter ends with a “Suggestions for Further Reading” section, in which the author suggests specific books relating to the issues discussed in that chapter. Also included at the end of the chapters is a “Suggestions for Further Study” or a “Suggested Activities” section, with plenty of exercises to apply in a training course.

Another valuable contribution is given by the two Appendices and the Bibliography. Appendix A provides instructions to be read by the judge to the party or witness whose testimony is being interpreted, and to the jurors. Such instructions can be easily adapted to express the interpreter’s voice when s/he first talks to the party or the witness.

Appendix B draws on two documents, the “Best Practice in Court Interpreting” and the “Code of Conduct for Court Interpreters”, issued by the International Federation of Translators. Basic guidelines on interpreting and translation assignments and the conduct of interpreters are provided in a very concise, easy-to-read format.

An extensive bibliography adds to the book’s usefulness. It includes both dense theoretical

literature such as Catford’s *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, and publications of a practical nature, such as Japan’s *Guide to Court Procedures*. Publications in French and Spanish are also included. Most books and articles included were published in the 1990s.

In my view, the main quality of Mikkelsen’s book is that it covers a lot of ground in only 106 pages. As an introductory book, it gives a very comprehensive view of the interpreting profession. In addition, the book provides a valuable resource for interpretation teachers, both for training courses and (under)graduate courses. All the exercises suggested are feasible and can be easily adapted for special purposes.

According to its author, the objective of the book is to “present an overview of the field and alert teachers and students to avenues for further inquiry” (p. 1). The book does all that and also stimulates the reader to conduct further readings on the topic. In sum, this book seems to be a very promising beginning for the *Translation Practices Explained* series of which this volume is part. All the features reported above

make the book essential for teachers of interpreting, and for both novice and trained interpreters.

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