Liaison Interpreters’ Empowerment under Michel Foucault’s Thought of Power

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Michel Foucault’s thought of power believes that everyone within a relational network plays a role and holds certain power in hand to stabilize and strengthen the function of the network. Liaison interpreters, clients, and the communication context are three most important components of the communication network. During the interpreting process, interpreters hold some power in hand and they will use this power when necessary through the action of empowerment. In this paper, with analysis on liaison interpreters’ empowerment under different occasions, three kinds of empowerment can be concluded; liaison interpreters empower themselves; liaison interpreters empower clients; interpreters empower context. It also proves that proper empowerment could facilitate the communication while over-empowerment could hinder the communication.

Keywords: empowerment, liaison interpreter, client, context

Introduction

“Megaphone”, “invisible man”, “dancing with shackles”, and “language converter” are all metaphors for interpreters. These metaphors all, implicitly or explicitly, imply certain contempt towards interpreters’ status. Throughout the ages, numerous interpreters have completed different types of interpreting work at different times and on different occasions, and have made indelible contributions to cross-language and cross-culture communication. However, except for a few interpreters are known to the media and the outside world out of certain reason, most interpreters are hard to find. It is precisely because of the invisible nature, it is hard to believe that “interpreter” and “rights” are two words with correlation.

On the contrary, many interpreters feel that they play a special role in their interpreting process. That mysterious role is brought into play through their interpreting practice. However, due to the fact that most of the views on the status of translators in history are negative, interpreters do not have the heart to declare that they have a mysterious role. One reason is that interpreters do not have audience to tell about their so-called mysterious role, as their clients merely pay attention to whether the translation has achieved the expected results. The other reason is that interpreters do not have the courage and confidence to recognize such mysterious role as having long been immersed in an environment negative to their status. This paper boldly describes the “mysterious role” as “empowerment” and aims to make interpreters’ subjectivity more explicit.

In addition, the interpreters’ empowerment is most prominent in liaison interpreting for the following reasons. First, liaison interpretation is widely used in various social fields, including formal occasions and informal occasions; second, interpreters’ empowerment and flexibility can be regulated according to the clients’
attitude, the environmental atmosphere, the topic and its content, and etc. These make interpreters’ empowerment more visible (Zhang, 2016). In view of this, this paper chooses to elaborate liaison interpreters’ empowerment.

**Michel Foucault’s Thought of Power**

Traditionally, power is visible and presentable, and it is concentrated in the hands of only a few people who are on the top. It is a kind of possession the owner can be proud of, and it can be seen in majestic ceremonies and national institutions. However, under Michel Foucault’s thought of power, power becomes invisible as it is not embodied in a certain person, but reflected in an arrangement. It goes from a certain people on the top to everyone within the relational network. Each one of them is, on the one hand, a ruler giving power to others; on the one hand, the ruled being given power by others. Thus each single person within the network will influence the stability and solidarity of the network. The network is supposed to be strengthened and consolidated by connecting the dots inside the net and by maximizing the potential of every one (Foucault, 1999, p. 183).

Liaison interpreters, together with clients and the communication context constitute the three most important components of a communication network. They play a very important role and they hold certain power in hand. Under necessary circumstances, liaison interpreters will use their power through the action of empowerment to ensure smooth progression of the communication.

Empowerment often involves two aspects: the subject and the recipient. The empowerment subject refers to an individual or organization with grasp of resources; while the empowerment recipient is an individual or a group in a relatively disadvantaged position. Although in a dynamic liaison interpreting activity, any individual could become the empowerment subject or recipient in different situations, this paper only discusses the situation in which liaison interpreters act as the empowerment subject.

Under the empowerment theory, liaison interpreters’ role includes three aspects. First, liaison interpreters are equipped with bilingual ability; second, liaison interpreters’ role may encounter ambiguities and conflicts as being an intermediary; third, liaison interpreters have such considerable power as monopolizing communication. The advantage of bilingual background allows liaison interpreters to have special power in the communication and exert great influence on the final results of the activities (Lu, 2014).

**Liaison Interpreters’ Empowerment under Michel Foucault’s Thought of Power**

**Liaison Interpreters Empower Themselves**

Liaison Interpreters’ subjectivity could be seen from that they empower themselves. In a communication environment, when different opinions of the clients in terms of a certain topic is likely to result in disagreement and argument, and may pose danger to the negotiation process, liaison interpreters, at this time, could bring their subjectivity into play by empowering themselves to end a topic in time, so as to prevent negative influence from happening and affecting the entire communication process.

On a reception dinner held by a Chinese school in honor of a Germany designer, the school principal presents the Germany designer a pack of tea as a gift to show gratitude of the school side. At dinner, the principal emphasizes again and again that the gift is trifling and hope that the designer would not mind. Just because of too many times’ emphasis, the designer turns unhappy as he thinks that he comes here for lecturing, but not for gifts. Does this emphasis show that the designer regards gifts important? This makes the designer
insulted and makes the atmosphere embarrassing (CP-Chinese Principal, GD-Germany Designer, I-Interpreter).

CP: 非常感谢设计师给我们学校工业设计专业的学生上课，你把自己多年的经验传授给他们，让他们开拓了国际视野，我相信他们肯定收获颇丰。

I: Thank you very much for giving lectures to our students majoring in Industrial Design. You have imparted to them your experience accumulated throughout the years, and help them open up their international perspective. I believe they must harvest a lot.

GD: I am also honored to have the opportunity to give lectures in your school. The students are hard to start, but they turned better later. They did learn a lot.

I: 我也很高兴能在贵校讲课。学生们刚开始起劲较缓，但是后来好多了，他们确实收获颇丰。

CP: 这是黄山毛峰，小小礼物，不成敬意。

I: This is Maofeng Green Tea from Huangshan Mountain. Just a small gift. Hope you like it.

GD: Thank you. I like it.

(喝了一杯酒)

CP: 请你呀，不要嫌弃，等你下次来，再送你一份大礼。

I: I hope you will not despise it. Next time when you come, I would give you a bigger present.

GD: Oh no, I do not mind at all. I like it.

(喝了一杯酒)

CP: 可能你觉得这算不上什么礼物，但是却代表我们学校的一点心意。

I: Maybe you think it is not a big deal, but it embodies our appreciation.

GD: Oh no, I have never said in this way. Why would you think like that?

I: 他想请您喝一杯。

CP: He raised his glass.

GD: He raised his glass.

Every nation and every culture has its own history, experience, structure, and characters. Each individual, when participating in a dialogue or communication, would bring with him/her unavoidable cultural position which belongs to a certain culture or sub-culture. In the principal’s mind, he thinks it is face-losing to give a foreign designer just a pack of tea as gift, and out of humiliation he unconsciously mentioned it continuously. This makes the Germany designer feel very uncomfortable because he believes it is moral insult to regard him as a person who values gifts. After three times’ emphasis from the school side, the designer becomes angry. At this moment, the interpreter realizes the situation and interferes in the communication by empowering himself to say “He would like to propose a toast to you”. These words are not uttered by any party, but out of the interpreters’ own mind. This empowerment ends the unhappy communication and prevents the foreseeable bad result from happening. Thereupon, the process of liaison interpreting, to a certain extent, is a process of negotiation and mediation between two cultures, with the interpreter acting as an intermediary with purpose to compensate for the gap between the two parties, namely, the two cultures (Shen, 2012).

However, at the same time, it should be noted that liaison interpreters have a limited degree of subjectivity, and they should not over-empower themselves. Liaison interpreters must understand their role clearly in the entire conversation process. Their empowerment is to facilitate conversation so as to achieve the desired effect of communication. If liaison interpreters over-evaluate their role and over-empower themselves, it will undermine clients’ trust in them and hinder the procession of communication (Xu, 2017).
A famous Germany designer is invited by China Industrial Design Association to attend the Industrial Design Conference which is held in Bengbu, Anhui Province. During the private communication with the designer, the liaison interpreter gets to know some personal information of the designer that the designer is free at the weekend. When the President of CIDA asks whether the designer is available at weekend, the interpreter answers “Yes” on behalf of the designer without translating the president’s question, because the interpreter knows the designer is free at weekend during their previous private communication (P-President of CIDA, GD-Germany Designer, I-interpreter).

P: 想问问设计师周末有没有空，单独吃个饭，看看有没有合作空间？
I: 他有的，周末暂时是空挡。
P: 那太好了，那咱们就约周日11:00，小南国见！
I: 好嘞，我会转达。
I: We will meet each other at 11:00 in Shanghai Min to explore cooperation opportunities.
GD: What? I am not available on Sunday.
I: But you told me you are free on weekend.
GD: That is my private issue. Yes, I am free on Sunday, but I usually rest on Sunday.
I: Oh I am extremely sorry. I thought…
GD: Next time, please ask me first before you tell anyone if I am available for something. I myself am supposed to make arrangement of my own schedule.
I: Okay.
I: 真抱歉，我之前记错了，他周末已经有了安排。咱们下次再约吧，对不起！
P: 啊？怎么会这样？那好吧，下次再约吧。

The first over-empowerment act by the interpreter is his answering “Yes” without translating the question to the designer, and then, the president thinks the designer is free at weekend, and asks the designer to go out for a private dinner. The second over-empowerment act by the interpreter is his answering “Okay” to the president’s invitation to go out for private dinner, again without translating the invitation to the designer, because he knows the designer is available at weekend. After making a deal with the president about the time and place for the private dinner, the interpreter then starts to “inform” the designer of the appointment including the time, place, and arrangement. The designer feels nothing but startled how such an appointment is ascertained without asking him. The interpreter explains by saying to the designer “you told me you are free on weekend”. But the designer thinks that is personal talk, and business schedule is another thing. So, the interpreter has no other choice but to apologize to the designer and the president. In this case, the interpreter oversteps his right and over-empowers himself as to make decisions on behalf of the designer without inquiring the designer. The interpreter is supposed to assist communication between the two parties by translating what they have said to each other. Although sometimes interpreters can empower themselves according to the situation to avoid foreseeable adverse consequences and ensure effective communication, their over-empowerment acts can sometimes cause severe consequence. Both parties are unhappy, the interpreter is embarrassed, and it is detrimental to the relationship between the president and the designer and their cooperation. It can thus be seen that in high-level and formal occasions, interpreters must adjust their empowerment flexibly, so as to make their voices and attitudes appropriate on occasions full of political and cultural characteristics (Zhan, 2013).
Liaison Interpreters Empower Clients

Liaison Interpreters’ subjectivity could be seen from that they empower clients. Due to differences in culture and customs, clients from one country may not know much about the habits and regulations of one from another country, resulting in asymmetry in the communication. At this time, the liaison interpreters bring their subjectivity into play by empowering clients, so as to avoid wrongful behaviors and awkward situations of the clients, and make the communicative situation return to a balanced state.

On a reception dinner held by a Yantai government in honor of a Germany designer, Yantai municipal government personnel speak one by one. When it turns to the Germany Designer, he does not realize and sits there without saying anything. At this moment, the other government personnel are all waiting (YG-Yantai government, GD-Germany Designer, I-interpreter).

YG 1: 非常感谢德国设计师的到来，让我们学校蓬荜生辉……
I: Our school is greatly honored by your gracious presence.
YG 2: 烟台生态环境优美，是个好地方……
I: Yantai has beautiful ecological environment and is a good place.
YG 3: 烟台市政府近年来对工业设计的投资是很大的……
(All of them stared at GD, and GD was at a loss.)
I: Yantai municipal government has invested heavily in industrial design in recent years.
I: It is your turn to say something.
GD: Oh, it is my turn to speak now. Sorry, I did not realize. I am much honored to be invited here to give a RED DOT training…

Sometimes, clients are not able to express themselves fully either because they lack knowledge of the communicative form in an unfamiliar environment, or because the other party are dominating the communication. At this moment, experienced liaison interpreters would empower clients at a proper time through verbal or non-verbal form, encouraging and guiding clients to exercise their due power including speaking. Yantai government personnel believe that it is customary practice to take turns to speak, so after they finish their speaking, they are waiting for the designer to speak. However, the designer does not realize this established rule, and becomes totally at a loss when all the others are looking at him. At this moment, by empowering the designer, the liaison interpreter reminds and encourages him to take the turn to speak something.

However, although proper empowerment by liaison interpreters when disagreement emerges between two parties or cultures is beneficial for clients to continue their communication, over-empowerment to clients by liaison interpreters would also be detrimental to communication.

A Germany designer is invited by a Henan school to carry out workshop. When the designer asks the school head about the exact time for class, the school head, out of enthusiasm and respect, replies with “the class schedule all depends on your own arrangement” (HS-Henan school, GD-Germany Designer, I-Interpreter).

GD: What is the exact time for the workshop each day?
I: 请问您这边每天具体上课时间是几点到几点?
HS: 您这边怎么合适怎么安排，我们听您的。
I: The class schedule all depends on your own arrangement.
GD: Oh really? I can decide the schedule?
I: Yes.
GD: I do not need to ask the school about the schedule, right?
I: No, you do not have to.

During the five-day workshop, the Germany designer’s actual class schedule is 9:00-16:00, 10:00-16:00, 11:00-17:00, 10:00-16:00, and 10:00-17:00. The Germany designer arranges the class time totally according to his own schedule, which causes dissatisfaction among the teachers and the students. On the last day of the workshop, Henan school holds a farewell dinner in honor of the Germany designer to show their gratitude. During the dinner, the school head suggests that the designer had better give lectures on a fixed time frame if he is carrying out workshop next time.

HS: 非常感谢设计师给我们学校师生所做的工作坊培训。
I: Thank you very much for holding this workshop for the faculties in our school.
GD: It is my pleasure.
I: 这是我该做的，我也很乐意。
HS: 我有个建议，下次上课时间尽量每天固定，尽可能的也告知我们一声。
I: If I may, I would like to suggest a fixed time for class each day, and please tell us your arrangement if possible.
GD: Pardon? You said I do not need to ask the school about the schedule and I can arrange it myself. How come I need to tell them now?
I: Sorry. I think the school says like that just to show their respect to you.
GD: What a Chinese logic!
I: 真是不好意思，他可能理解有误，下次会注意的。
HS: 好吧。

In this workshop, the interpreter over-empowers the client, here namely the Germany Designer, by translating “The class schedule all depends on your own arrangement” and omitting the element of enthusiasm and respect from the school’s side. Thereupon, the designer decides the class time according to his own schedule. The interpreters’ over-empowerment to the designer not only results in the dissatisfaction among the teachers and the students, but also causes the designer’s confusion and anger when he hears the school head’s suggestion. The designer is confused that it is the school that says the class time depends on me and it is also the school that gives suggestion on my class time arrangement, he is wondering why does not the school tell him their requirement in the very beginning. From the interpreters’ explanation later to the school head, it can be seen that the interpreter knows already the school head says “The class schedule all depends on your own arrangement” out of enthusiasm and respect to the designer, but his act of omitting these element results in an unhappy ending.

Liaison Interpreters Empower Context

Liaison interpreters’ subjectivity could be seen from that they empower context. The context here refers to the dialogue environment in which clients, the interpreter, and related personnel stay. Context exerts influence on both parties and the communication result in such ways that a comfortable and balanced dialogue environment facilitates communication; while uncomfortable and unbalanced dialogue environment hinders communication. At this time, liaison interpreters bring their subjectivity into play by empowering context and
keeping the environment in symmetry.

Seven people from a Crowd-funding Company are going to have a meeting with a Germany Designer about cooperation on Miscea faucet. Miscea faucet is a product designed by the Germany designer with a large sales volume at foreign countries. Now, this Crowd-funding Company wants to cooperate with the designer to get the selling right of Miscea faucet in China as the company believes this faucet will have a huge market in China.

C: 我们了解到，您设计的Miscea牌水龙头在国外销售量很大，我希望与您合作，拓展Miscea牌水龙头在中国的市场。

I: We know that the Miscea Faucet designed by you has a very large sales volume. I would like to cooperate with you to tap into Chinese market.

D: As I am now working in China, I, of course, would like my product design to be popular here.

I: 我们目前在中国工作，我们当然希望我们的产品能够在中国也受欢迎。

C: 但是Miscea在国外零售价太高，在中国如果定这么高的价，估计买家会大大减少。

I: But the retail price of Miscea is too high, which would result in decreasing number of buyers.

D: That is because of the fine art applied in my product.

I: 这是因为我们的产品里有精致的工艺。

C: 我们希望您能对这个产品进行再设计，简化工艺，从而降低价格。

I: We would like you to re-design this product, simplify the art so as to decrease the price.

D: Of course, I would try my best.

I: 当然，我们会尽最大的努力。

When the position of liaison interpreter is tilted a little towards one party, it does not mean that the other party is viewed as an opposite party or that the interpreter is not cooperating with the other party. In fact, this positional change is subtle and is very often like a pendulum which depends on context. The interpreter may be tilted towards one party at one moment and at next moment tilted to the other party when needed. The Crowd-funding Company has seven people in the meeting while the Germany designer is alone by himself, which results in pressure on the designer's side and renders the designer in a disadvantaged situation. At this moment, the interpreter empowers the context by translating “I” into “we”, which, to a certain extent, creates a feeling that the designer is not himself alone, but has a group behind him to support him. This helps to alleviate the tense environment which is also beneficial for the cooperation communication.

Although a comfortable and balanced dialogue environment benefits communication, liaison interpreters’ over-empowerment to context without having a confirmed check of the context would cause disorder.

A company steals a brand and copies the product from a Germany designer, selling it all over China. With the increasing popularity and sales volume of the product, the Germany designer has found this phenomenon and asks for a negotiation with the company. The negotiation place is set in the company’s conference room. Under such context, the interpreter hired by the designer believes the company would have a large group of people present in the negotiation context so as to support the scene. In order not to make the designer fall behind in the negotiation, the interpreter suggests the designer bring as many people with him as possible so as to establish a powerful authority to make the other side, namely the company, feel a little frightened. It is expected to increase the designer’s chance to win the negotiation (C-Company, GD-Germany Designer, I-Interpreter).
I: I think you should bring as much people as possible to establish a powerful authority, so that the company would feel afraid and that helps to win you more chance.
GD: You really think so?
I: Yes.
GD: Okay, I will bring my engineer, my assistant and two of my colleagues.

When the negotiation day comes, the Germany designer comes to the conference room together with his engineer, assistant, and his lawyer. He enters the room only to find that there is only one people sitting there from the company’s side. The ratio of 4:1 makes the designer and the atmosphere very embarrassing. The meeting turns out to last only half an hour. The person from the company just mentions the company feels sorry about this incident, and does not mention whether the company will compensate and how much they will compensate. It turns out to be merely a test meeting set by the company to see the designer’s attitude towards the incident. It is nothing formal and it aims to achieve nothing but superficial. The interpreters’ wrong prediction of the nature of the meeting results in his over-empowerment to the context, which causes an embarrassing meeting atmosphere and hinders the following negotiation process.

Conclusion

Interpreters are always looked as “language converter” who plays the role of information-transmission pipeline. Interpreters are regarded as “necessary evil”, to whom the highest appreciation is that they are “almost imperceptible” in the interpreting process. Even interpreters themselves are passively holding this point. In fact, interpreters have power and the power has influence on the whole communication process. This paper presents a new understanding of liaison interpreters’ role from three aspects, and reflects that proper empowerment facilitates communication while over-empowerment hinders communication. Liaison interpreters must judge correctly when they need to empower and how much they can empower so as to avoid serious consequences such as lack of information, tilting standpoint and presumptuous act.

What is worth noting here is that this paper is not encouraging interpreters to step from their marginalized position to central position as the main focus should still be on the clients and their communication. The first and foremost responsibility and obligation of liaison interpreters is that they should convey the information in the discourse completely and accurately. What this paper is trying to do is to arouse the awareness of interpreters and those in the interpreting circle toward liaison interpreters’ empowerment. Interpreters should be confident enough to admit their power during the interpreting process, and those in the interpreting circle should not underestimate interpreters’ role as before.

Reference