Interpretation as a spur to knowledge

Although Laura Bertone warns us in the preface that her book “... is not a technical treatise on interpretation subjects...” and “… has not been specifically designed for teaching interpretation...” the author draws on many years experience as a professional interpreter; her material, analysis and commentary are a wink of complicity to readers from an interpreting background, although the book is certainly of potential interest to a wider readership.

Eduardo KAHANE.
Published: March 15, 2010 Last updated: December 2, 2015

A review of: The Hidden Side of Babel
by Laura Bertone
ISBN-10: 987214913

At the risk of gainsaying her warning, I sense I have read a book about interpretation in at least three of its five sections.

It provides food for thought and cogent arguments in favour of introspection and self-knowledge as a means to know others and by that token, the world around us. It is also a book about what we interpreters say to each other when we project our professional activity onto everyday life.

How a book evolves

Let us take things one at a time. What is the genesis of this book? The Hidden Side of Babel derives from another book, En torno de Babel, published 20 years ago in Spanish, parts of which had been drawn from the author’s doctoral thesis (Sur la relativité du sens). The first three sections of The Hidden Side reproduce the text published by Hachette in Buenos Aires in 1989, apart from minor amendments and some added material. These chapters point the kaleidoscope of interpretation at the mystery and radiance of language, converting the profession into a plaything to kindle ideas, make comparisons, seek parallels and shock with paradoxes. Yet I cannot shake off the notion that to put into words the sparks generated by her own curiosity, as if stepping daintily and apologizing for her own sense of wonder, the author ventures into the scholarly explanations proffered by several multi-syllabic sciences such as semiology, semantics, linguistics, psychology and several others. Is there pressure to be scientifically correct?

The intense effort required for simultaneous interpretation acts as a magnifying glass to examine reality – as represented by speech– and use the sciences that describe and explain discourse. Coming full circle, we can employ this knowledge to elucidate the processes of interpretation. The author therefore guides us over terrain that interpreters cross daily: language as a game, stating or withholding what is implicit in discourse, contradiction and techniques for coping with it,
Interferences, ritual settings and formal language.

**Interpretation as discourse**

Explaining the act of interpreting by referring to discourse and general communication helps both demystify it and, at the same time, shows up the nuances of utterance and communication that would otherwise pass unnoticed. The first three sections of the book develop these concepts by taking descriptions from other disciplines and providing authentic examples gleaned from interpreting, field studies, recordings and the comparison of source and target versions. There is no shortage of real life situations – amusing and pertinent – such as a misunderstanding between Paul Henri Spaak and Chou en Lai during the three party negotiations (China-USSR-UN) to end the Korean crisis during the Cold War in 1954 and the famous shoes beating out *njet* at the United Nations (in the edition of *En torno de Babel* in 1989 their owner was anonymous although the action is now candidly attributed to Nikita Khrushchev. Is this one of the revelations of *The Hidden Side*?).

The anecdotes are not only plentiful and amusing but are also discussed thoroughly and annotated. This brings us down from the heights of abstraction to a soft landing on the well-trod path of professional interpreting. The activity is not only simultaneous in the source and target languages but also at many other levels in the process of comprehension: morphological, phonological, syntactic and clearly semantic, but also at the level of context and knowledge, etc. The author tackles implication, inference and the attribution of intentions with an intellectual courage that confronts the axiomatic *vouloir dire*, relegating it to a didactic goal, a methodological approach and a doubtful postulation in absolute terms. For how can we claim an ability to know the speaker's ultimate intellectual intent?

This abundant and excellent conceptual study allows us to compare elements that might be considered exclusive to our trade, with monolingual communication and conversation. But the latter is also the abode of implicit messages, more or less candid or secret intentions of speakers, conflicting signals etc. Moreover, since Barthes and Kristeva’s intertextuality, it is recognised that when we speak, we are in fact translating ourselves.

**Food for thought**

This book is an isolated yet commendable attempt to broaden the intellectual approach to conference interpretation. Up to now research – perhaps because it has mainly been carried out in academic institutions – has concentrated on explaining the process of interpreting and in revealing its mechanisms; as a budding science it has been at pains to demonstrate its status by using empirical, descriptive and replicable methods. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this – on the contrary, it has provided a considerable conceptual drive and facilitated the development of models and brought major advances in teaching – but it could benefit from the counterweight of more holistic, introspective and inclusive approaches. This exercise would admittedly involve the occasional leap into the unknown, but such are the impulses of intellect that break away from routine and sometimes strike gold.

The last two parts of the book were written more recently. They apply a different method and consider a series of areas linked to interpreting activity, draw some parallels and offer advice. They introduce an "internal interpreter", a sort of observer of all the internal processes of the profession and life; we are told about variance and invariance in science and language and explanations are given about the anatomy, history and workings of the brain. Despite the unquestionable interest of each of the subjects considered, there is a lack of field work; we need more examples and models from interpretation.

**Rituals, theatre and ethics**
I do not want to omit three areas that appear to strike a nerve with the author, and which are seldom encountered in the literature; I have to admit to sharing the author's enthusiasm and curiosity. I am talking about formal language and ritual situations (based on Goffman's work), about intensity and consequences of identification that parallel theatrical drama (Stanislavsky, and I would add Brecht) and about the need to bring the ethical dimension of interpreting into research and the debate. Bertone mounts a single-handed defence of this approach, particularly in high-risk situations, in conflict and when operating close to power. Even when an interpreter's version is neutral, the situation in which interpretation is performed can rarely be neutral and we should recall that in the name of neutrality or human rights we have the liberty – sometimes the duty – to reject a job.

In the way that I once believed that the title *En torno a Babel* was coined in homage to George Steiner's coruscating intellect (*After Babel*), I feel the present *opus* could in turn acknowledge Edward Hall (*The Hidden Dimension*) and his contribution to intercultural relationships, which this book fully signs us up to. The symbolic image of the fall of Babel provided at its conclusion is not that involving the traditional bewilderment caused by the proliferation of languages, but the breakdown of communication, whichever the language. The implicit effort therefore is to build bridges, to interpret from *language* as much as or more than from *languages*. The corollary would be that the difficulties of interpretation encountered are also, or principally, those of understanding and overcoming the difficulties of discourse and communication.

This book has won the Samuel I. Hayakawa Prize, awarded for the first time by the Institute of General Semantics of the United States “to the most outstanding work published in the past five years on topics of direct relevance to the discipline of general semantics”. I trust that publishing it in English will make it readily accessible to readers and spark meaningful discussion.

These pages evince curiosity about and devotion to the profession. It is a circular work, written in swirling eddies over a long period. This perhaps explains why the method applied is not always the same; although that in no way detracts from the book’s chief merits, it does slightly weaken its concluding part. Nevertheless this is a volume that opens horizons; it is timely and well documented and written with dedication and love for the profession. It deserves our gratitude, if for no other reason. The author explains to expert and non-expert alike how this profession has taught her to see and understand a world that fascinates her. Paradoxically her legacy is more than a description of the universe she sees, it is also the eyes that see it.

English version by Philip D. Smith

---

**Recommended citation format:**
