

Figures of Interpretation

Edited by B.A.S.S. Meier-Lorente-
Muth-Duchêne

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Figures of Interpretation is an original and fascinating, if at times frustrating, piece of work. It consists of an introduction plus 31 short vignettes, only a few pages each, which offer brief accounts of the life and work of a wide range of “figures of interpretation,” used here to refer to people who carry out interlingual interpretation in one context or another. Some vignettes were written by the figures of interpretation themselves, but most were produced by researchers writing about people they have interacted with in the context of research or daily life, or on the basis of historical inquiry into people who are now long dead. In line with the aims of the *Writing Without Borders* series, various attempts are made to break away from norms of scholarly writing. The editors are, somewhat cryptically, credited solely as B.A.S.S. Meier-Lorente-Muth-Duchêne. The introduction suggests that the editors are based in Switzerland, but no specific background is given in the text itself. The “author biography” on the book’s page on the publisher’s website states only that “B.A.S.S. Meier-Lorente-Muth-Duchêne works in academia.”¹ Three different tables of contents are provided to emphasise that there is no expectation that the book be read linearly from start to finish. The text itself is supplemented by 10 illustrations by the Berlin-based illustrator and graphic novelist Nino Paula Bulling based on their own interpretation of the vignettes. The relatively brief introduction, entitled “Navigating Figures of Interpretation,” sets out the book’s approach and aims and highlights its key themes. To explain their unorthodox approach, the authors express dissatisfaction with the norms of academic publishing before stating that “we felt the need to write in a different form and came up with the idea of short portraits” (p. 16), suggesting that a collection of such portraits “allows us to access and better understand larger structural processes through the singularity of individual trajectories” (p. 17). The book’s stated aim is to produce something like a map of the diverse contexts in which interpreting



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takes place, characterised by “connections and breaks, faint paths and moments of intense overlaps and intersections” (p. 19). There is no explicit argument, but the themes highlighted are familiar to any student of translation and interpreting: contested allegiance, the ambivalent role of interpreting in both disrupting and maintaining power imbalances, its indispensability yet frequent invisibility.

The vignettes themselves are captivating and address an impressively diverse range of geographical contexts: Bintou is a court interpreter in Malawi; Arnaldo provides ad hoc Spanish–English community interpreting between police and victims of crime in London; Evans interprets as part of working for an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Kenya; Narendra interprets for Russian medical tourists in India. The historical spread is also impressively wide: An Cha’s present-day Korean–German interpreting in the context of cinema sits alongside an account of Conrad’s role in negotiating treaties between Native Americans and British colonists in the 18th century and Arokiam’s missionary work in late 19th-century colonial Malaya. Given the ongoing challenges of ethnocentrism in Translation and Interpreting Studies, and an increasingly urgent sense that we must decolonise the discipline, such a broad and inclusive view is certainly to be applauded. Together, the vignettes make a compelling case for the complexity of interpreting. They show time and time again how myriad local and structural factors shape the way it happens while also emphasising just how much variation there is in the specific conditions in which interpreters work, particularly when we look beyond the Global North.

The vignettes take narrative form, offering stories that generally provide both a potted history of a figure’s engagement with interpretation and specific illustrative experiences. Explicit theorising is kept to a minimum, although some contributors seemingly could not help themselves from introducing at least some abstract discussion and interpretation. The vignettes do not reference one another, and in keeping with the unusual approach, there is no conclusion to the book as a whole to tie together the various threads raised in the vignettes into the kind of neatly and precisely formulated arguments normally expected of scholarly writing. As implied by the multiple tables of contents, the vignettes could perfectly reasonably be read in any order.

The question, then, is how effective this unusual approach proves. In some respects, it is very effective indeed. A strong emphasis on narrative keeps things firmly grounded in the specific. Rather than starting with an argument about unequal power relations supported with illustrative examples, the reader sees the issue playing out before them in the vignettes in a host of different ways. The great strength of the lack of theorising is that this variation is neither lost nor suppressed in the pursuit of finding a common denominator. This allows us to see, for instance, the challenges faced by receptionists in a multilingual Canadian hospital in their own terms, rather than as an example of a broader point. We read the story of Ilona, born in Moldova before emigrating to Germany following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and learn something about Ilona *as* Ilona, rather than as an object of research or an informant. In this sense, *Figures of Interpretation* largely achieves what it sets out to do: reaffirming that “figures [of interpretation] are real people and every real person can be a figure” (p. 17). The recurrent themes of the book, familiar as they are, come through strongly and in a more organic way than in

much scholarly work. The short vignettes give a sense of pace and feature less of the performative complexity that comes with most academic writing.

In other respects, however, it is less successful. As noted, there is little explicit framing—the aim seems to be to leave readers to draw their own conclusions from, and connections between, the vignettes. Yet more subtle intervention runs throughout the text, at times in frustrating ways. Clearly, choices were made in deciding on which vignettes to include in the first place, yet little detail is given as to how these decisions were made. The brevity of each vignette means that a harsh editing process was inevitable to decide which details are relevant and which were deemed not worth including. In this regard, it is noteworthy that all but one of the vignettes appear to have been written by authors with academic backgrounds, overwhelmingly from institutions in the Global North: in two, the authors write about themselves, but nonetheless have academic backgrounds; a further three vignettes are co-written by academics and the “figures” themselves; the remaining 25 vignettes are written solely by academics, seemingly with no direct input from the figures themselves. This may explain why, despite the fascinating details offered, there is little in the portraits to challenge established orthodoxies in Translation and Interpreting Studies in terms of the issues raised or the way in which they are spoken about. Doubtless Translation and Interpreting scholars have already identified many of the key issues encountered by interpreters; nonetheless, it was hard to shake the feeling that the academic authors were largely noticing and highlighting what they expected to see.

The writers of the vignettes themselves, then, loom large as figures of interpretation in their own right, an issue which is only briefly acknowledged in the introduction in saying that the figures “are interpreted individually and, through this book, are open for interpretation collectively and connectively. *Figures of Interpretation*, therefore, also addresses the authors and the readers, who become figures of interpretation themselves” (p. 20). It is striking, all the same, that the interpretive activity of those who wrote the vignettes is largely elided. As a consequence, the voices that come through most strongly are those of the vignette authors, rather than those of the figures of interpretation themselves. No attempt is made to hide this—author names are given; the third person is used in those vignettes not written by their subjects; the introduction promises “portraits” rather than “self-portraits.” Nonetheless, there is a strong sense throughout that, while the contexts covered are highly diverse, the perspectives from which we see them as readers are more homogeneous. In my view, this somewhat undermines the editors’ goal of finding a “format that would give space to. . . individual experiences” (p. 16).

Figures of Interpretation also suffers from a degree of haziness about its purpose. As discussed, the introduction explicitly refers to dissatisfaction with standard forms of academic writing, although the causes of that dissatisfaction are not mentioned. Nonetheless, it does specifically aim to “produce knowledge” (p. 16) and argues that “the collection of their portraits contributes to an understanding of how language intersects with race, class, gender and geopolitical space” (p. 20). The question for me is what types of knowledge and understanding are being produced. In rejecting norms of carefully formulated theory and methodology, the supports of standard academic knowledge production are largely knocked aside, but without replacement supports being put into place in their stead. The emphasis on the personal responses of the vignette authors is interesting, but feels anecdotal and without the rigour of methods such as ethnography or narrative

inquiry. The focus on individual experience in the vignettes is arresting, but their brevity, and the breadth of their coverage, leads to inevitable superficiality—it is impossible to gain a deep understanding of each figure from the few pages allocated to them. Instead, as I progressed through the book, I found myself feeling increasingly disoriented as the myriad names and contexts began to blur, without a central thread of argumentation to hold them together. I certainly developed a new understanding of interpreting by reading the book, but I wonder whether it was a scholarly understanding.

There is a similar ambiguity about the book's intended audience. As noted, it neither conforms to, nor aspires to, the traditional standards of scholarly work, feeling something like popular non-fiction. Yet it is published by an academic press which labels the book's readership as "Postgraduate, Research/Professional, Undergraduate," suggesting an academic audience. The language used in the Introduction sits firmly within the idiom of complex, jargon-heavy academic writing. This gives the impression that creating an accessible text for a wider audience was not the editors' intention, although most of the vignettes themselves are written in an accessible style. Would I set it as a reading for my students on the MA Translation or Interpreting programmes at my institution? Yes—early in the course as a way to broaden their minds and alert them to the diversity of contexts in which interpreting takes place and to the enormous importance of the specific situations in which interpreters work. Individual portraits could also be effectively used as readings in relation to specific topics—perhaps the story of Evans who interprets for NGOs in Kenya and Aicha who has provided Arabic-English translation and interpreting as part of her work with NGOs in the Middle East to support a class on translation and development; Bintou and Alain or Bernardino to support classes on community interpreting; Arokiam or Daniel to situate translation and interpreting in a longer historical context. In this context, *Figures of Interpretation* provides a valuable supplement to somewhat drier treatments found in much scholarly literature.

Figures of Interpretation, then, is a curious thing. Read as a piece of scholarly work, it has notable weaknesses. Yet it is these very "weaknesses" which also make it compelling and potentially valuable, particularly to early-stage students. Ditching overt discussion of theory and methodology costs rigour, but also sheds much of the weight that bogs down academic prose. The vignettes lack depth, but are also easy, and enjoyable, to read. It is confusing to read from start to end, but, in line with the editors' intentions, it meaningfully rewards being dipped into. I believe that it adds something not found in "peer-reviewed articles that rely on theory, methodology and the usual claim to authorship of countable publications on which academic careers are built" (p. 16).

I have asked my library to buy a copy.

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Note

1. <https://www.multilingual-matters.com/page/detail/Figures-of-Interpretation/?k=9781788929387>

Biography

Neil Sadler is senior lecturer in translation and interpreting at Queen's University Belfast. His forthcoming monograph *Fragmented narrative: Telling and interpreting stories in the Twitter age* examines the implications of the fragmentation characteristic of Twitter, and much contemporary communication more broadly, for narrative production and reception. His work has previously been published in journals including *New Media & Society* and the *Journal of North African Studies* and has contributed entries to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media* (2020).