



Ethnographic research in translation and interpreting studies

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ABSTRACT

In tandem with the growing interdisciplinarity of translation and interpreting studies, and an increasing interest in participant- and process-oriented studies in the field, there has been a burgeoning of innovation in methodologies that transcend disciplinary boundaries. Ethnographic approaches have gained popularity in the last thirty years, as researchers have felt compelled to enter the field to study the agents, their practices and actual processes of translation and interpreting. Whilst the literature on ethnography has flourished in the social sciences, there has been little systematic reflection on how ethnography has expanded translation studies scholarship. In parallel, the divide between translation and interpreting scholars adopting ethnographic approaches has limited the internal dialogue in the field. This article expands the definition of ethnography in translation studies beyond its methodological application to include an understanding of ethnography as an overarching research framework. It also looks into the reasons that explain the relatively late adoption of ethnography in translation studies. Finally, the overview of articles included in the special issue demonstrates how ethnography can contribute to diverse areas of translation studies and points towards future possibilities.

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1. Introduction

This special issue was born out of what we saw as an increasing use of ethnography by scholars in translation studies, occurring in tandem with the growing attention paid to various sociological aspects of translation and interpreting practices. When issuing a call for papers in early 2021, our intention was to gather the most recent research that engages with ethnography both methodologically and conceptually. Our aim was also to stimulate an internal dialogue between what we saw as a divide between ethnographic studies focusing on translation and those focusing on interpreting, and to expand the use of ethnography to an overarching framework instead of limiting it to a set of methods (as we will explain in the next section). Our ambition resonates with two other important initiatives that were held around the same time. One was the international conference of ‘Field Research on Translation and Interpreting’, organised by the Centre for Translation Studies of the University of Vienna in February 2022. Although not exclusively focused on

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ethnography, the conference centred on fieldwork, a crucial element in any ethnographic study. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first time that fieldwork took centre stage at an international translation studies conference. As the chair of the conference, Hanna Risku, noted in her opening remarks, the organising committee intentionally grouped presentations from both translation and interpreting studies in the same panels, avoiding any unnecessary division between the two subfields. This approach was also reflected in selecting the keynote speeches: one was given by Kaisa Koskinen, a pioneer of ethnography in institutional translation settings; another by Jemina Napier, a leading figure in ethnographic explorations of sign language communication. Later that same year, Buzelin (2022) published a timely article discussing the state of the art of ethnography in translation studies, jointly reviewing (also for the first time) the work of both translation and interpreting scholars. With this special issue, we aim not only to continue to promote the dialogue on ethnography across both strands of research, but also link discussions on ethnography in the field of translation studies with the debates which are happening in other disciplines, especially social and cultural anthropology, in which ethnography is rooted. In this introductory article, we first define ethnography in the context of both anthropology and translation studies, then move on to presenting the status quo of existing ethnographic literature in translation studies.

2. Ethnography as framework, methodology and text

As a form of inquiry originating in anthropology in the late nineteenth century (Guber 2001, 23), ethnography was employed by sociologists as early as the 1920s (initially by the Chicago School), and was later adopted across disciplines such as linguistics, organisational studies, communication studies, and education, to name a few. Due to its complex history and development (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007, 2), ethnography has been given various definitions, from which we would like to extrapolate three core dimensions: 1) a research framework, 2) a methodology based on fieldwork, and 3) a written product. As argued by Buzelin (2022), the tendency in translation studies has been to either focus on ethnography as methodology (Risku et al. 2022; Biagini 2016; Leblanc 2014; Saldanha and O'Brien 2013; Hubscher-Davidson 2011), or as a form of cultural translation and a mode of writing (Sturge 2007, 1997; Wolf 2002). However, understanding ethnography as a research framework is, in our view, the most inclusive perspective, as the principles that characterise ethnography as a research framework influence the way we do ethnography, the way we interpret data and write about it, and the way in which new theoretical development is grounded. After all, research and writing are intertwined in ethnography:

When we call both, our research projects and their publication, 'ethnography' this is conceptually muddled talk but it does reflect a fact: production of ethnography is not a unidirectional process, it works (starting at the moment when we take notes or make texts based on recordings) from both ends, research and writing. (Fabian 2014, 204)

Here, we intentionally distinguish 'framework' from 'approach'. Considering ethnography's multifaceted and transdisciplinary nature, we use the term framework to indicate that conceptual, theoretical and methodological elements of ethnography are encompassed by the notion of framework, and to accentuate how that framework, especially when underpinned by an interpretive and hermeneutic epistemology, guides the design

of an ethnographic research project. Finally, as argued above, 'ethnography' goes beyond data collection and data analysis, and is part and parcel of a mode of writing and cultural representation. Therefore, we argue that 'ethnography' denotes a research framework with its distinctive research values.

An essential value present in ethnographic projects is the relevance of context and the attention paid to seemingly mundane practices. This feature of ethnography is particularly germane to translation and interpreting studies, which, at least since the 1990s, have given increasing weight to sociological factors. For instance, in this special issue, Li's ethnographic fieldwork enables her to uncover less tangible aspects of court interpreting practices, such as translation beliefs. Another core element of any ethnographic study, which uses participant observation often in combination with interviews, is the fact that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions with informants, and is then reconstructed and represented in ethnographic texts – both of which are interpretive experiences (Heyl 2007, 370). This means that ethnographic texts are generated through intersubjectivity and copresence (Fabian 2014). In this special issue, Haidar and Ruiz Rosendo highlight this interpretive and generative aspect of ethnography by focusing on how a specific type of account, the impressionist tale, allows the researcher to create a polyphonic text that gives voice to the interpreters in field missions for international organisations, without breaching confidentiality. The importance of the discursive choices in an ethnographic text, on the other hand, is foregrounded in Villanueva-Jordán and Ramírez-Colombier's article, which examines the translation choices affecting the reception of an American pioneering queer ethnographic essay into Spanish.

Another important value of ethnography lies in its ongoing engagement with theory, which is underpinned by a circular inductive reasoning model (Grbich 2013). Boéri's article in this special issue particularly engages with theory by proposing an ethnonarrative methodology that considers narrative as an unavoidable lens through which the ethnographer co-constructs a culture of change with the participants. In addition, ethnographers have a specific predisposition or attitude: as they immerse themselves in the field, wishing to learn about the people they encounter and their culture, they are open to the unexpected and make decisions in situations of uncertainty. During fieldwork, ethnographers play different roles and are advised to practice (self-)reflexivity, which is a process through which they continually reflect on their own participation and position and ask themselves how their background (class, gender, ethnicity, etc.) will impact the interactions with those they study, as well as subsequent data interpretation and writing. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 39, original emphases) add two more dimensions to (self-)reflexivity: the position of the researcher in the academic field and 'the *intellectualist bias* which entices us to construe the world as *spectacle*, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically'. The importance of (self-)reflexivity has become a core value of ethnography and has been specifically emphasised in existing translation studies literature (see, for example, Yu 2020; Dufrou 2016; Koskinen 2008). In this special issue, Dong adds an affective dimension to the issue of self-reflexivity by examining her own reactions and emotions while conducting an ethnography of a UK-based interpreting agency and reflecting on how this analysis has helped her better understand her field site. Additionally, the moral responsibility towards participants, and research ethics in general, are especially important in ethnography, as

informants are always involved in fieldwork, interviews and other forms of data collection, and are also visible in the final ethnographic text. Huang, Cadwell and Sasamoto's article delves into the ethics of online ethnographies in their study of a fansubbing community.

The combination of all the research values mentioned above characterises ethnography as a framework. For translation studies research, the advantages of ethnography thus include the fact that it recognises the importance of both text and context, highlights the roles of various agents in the translation process, and promotes (self-)reflexivity and dialogue among translation researchers and practitioners (Buzelin 2022, 2006; Hubscher-Davidson 2011; Koskinen 2008). In addition, ethnography is suitable to study views, motivations and the meaning of norms among translation and interpreting practitioners; to explore interactions and negotiations among translators, interpreters and other actors; and to identify new patterns and gain new insights into translation and interpreting phenomena.

3. The late blossoming of ethnography in translation studies

The establishment and epistemological evolution of translation studies in the 1970s and 1980s explains the late adoption of ethnography as a framework and methodology to study translations. For example, Toury's (1985) systematic use of the term 'science' to refer to the discipline of translation studies and his contempt towards applied research, which he considered a mere 'extension' of the field (Toury 1995, 17–19), marked the future evolution of the discipline. Buzelin (2022, 36) rightly points to concomitant discourses from Francophone scholars, like Berman (1984), whose conceptualisation of *traductologie* drew the discipline closer to hermeneutics, philosophy and history. However, the influence of francophone *traductologie* remained less influential in the evolution of translation studies.

The anthropological debates in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by postcolonialism as a critique of power asymmetries, took a very different turn. Said's (1978) framing of anthropological practice within Orientalist discourse shook the discipline. At the same time, the crisis of representation in the social sciences marked the decline of a positivist tradition, giving room to accounts that put reflexivity and positionality in the spotlight. Anthropologists started to question their right to interpret other realities, to decide what should or should not be included in their accounts and how it should be represented (Murphy and Dingwall 2001, 344–345). The debates at the time covered issues of method, epistemology and forms of representation. While not integral to the development of translation studies as a discipline, these discussions did draw anthropology closer to translation studies, in the sense that ethnography was seen as a kind of translation, and anthropologists started to question their capacity to translate other cultures (see, for example, Asad 1986; Geertz 1973).

Both Wolf (2002) and Sturge (2007) have identified a parallelism between the crisis of representation in the social sciences and the tendency in translation studies to stop considering the source text as a fixed entity that is translated objectively. This parallelism had to do with changes in the conceptualisation of translation as the discipline moved away from linguistics, but did not change the fact that research approaches in the 1970s and 1980s prioritised a systematic collection of objective data around translations and avoided discussing topics such as reflexivity and the researcher's positionality. This would

have to wait until the 1990s, when sociological approaches gained ground, leading to agents, contexts and processes becoming foci of research.

The pioneer ethnographers in translation studies were interpreting scholars working on court interpreting (Wadensjö 1998; Berk-Seligson 1990) and medical interpreting (Angelelli 2004; Davidson 2000) whose research played a key role in debunking the idea of the interpreter as a neutral conduit. Around the same time, the increased presence of scholars who wished to study 'translation as social practice' (Wolf 2007, 27) and, in particular, the major influence of Bourdieu's scholarship in translation studies paved the way for a larger number of ethnographic studies in the literary field (such as Buzelin 2007, 2006). Since then, in parallel with a shift in attention from texts to practices and contexts (or with attempts to reconcile all these dimensions), ethnographic approaches have gained popularity, as researchers have felt compelled to enter the field in order to study agents, their practices, and actual processes of translation and interpreting, and to examine interactions involving both human and non-human actors. Ethnographic approaches have been adopted to study interpreting in healthcare settings (Baraldi and Gavioli 2007), institutional translation (Leblanc 2014; Koskinen 2008), non-government organisations (Tesseur 2022), translation agencies (Olohan and Davitti 2017; Leblanc 2013), institutional conference interpreting (Duflou 2016), online translation communities (Lu and Lu 2022; Yu 2022, 2019), and literary translation grants and publishers (Marin-Lacarta 2019; Marin-Lacarta and Vargas-Urpi 2019, 2018; Buzelin 2015), among other topics.

4. Overview of contributions

The contributions gathered in this special issue cover different aspects of ethnography in translation and interpreting research, from methodological challenges (Huang, Cadwell and Sasamoto; Dong), to theoretical explorations (Boéri; Li), as well as experimental ethnographic texts (Haidar and Ruiz Rosendo) and their translation (Villanueva-Jordán and Ramírez Colombier). The selection of articles reflects the wide contribution of ethnographic research to translation studies, and the breadth as well as depth of its impact on the discipline. The field sites and research areas vary and include online subtitler communities (Huang, Cadwell and Sasamoto), interpreting agencies (Dong), interpreters in conflict zones (Haidar and Ruiz Rosendo), activist non-professional interpreting communities (Boéri), and the translation of ethnographic texts on queerness (Villanueva-Jordán and Ramírez-Colombier).

The collection opens with **Boyi Huang, Patrick Cadwell and Ryoko Sasamoto's** paper on the strategies adopted to overcome ethical challenges in an online ethnography of a Chinese LGBT+ subtitlers' community. In seeking to understand volunteer subtitlers' daily experiences and participating motivations, Boyi Huang adopted a set of methods including participant observation, surveys, interviews and reflexive journaling. Huang, Cadwell and Sasamoto reflect on the ethical challenges encountered during the four stages of the project, which are negotiating access to the various fieldwork sites, obtaining participants' consent, managing data, and reflecting on their own positionality in relation to the community members. The authors bring to the fore the unique ethical challenges of obtaining participants' informed consent due to the debate over what is regarded as 'public' *versus* 'private' information in an online space. In addition, they

highlight the dilemmas connected to the risk of inadvertently further marginalising already marginalised sexual minorities in the process of identity anonymisation.

During fieldwork, the ethnographer's own background, position, interests, values, biases and responses to what happens in the field play a crucial role in generating the research data and shaping the study. Being aware of and recognising the ethnographer's involvement in the research context, and understanding her own positionality as well as that of the researched are important steps in ethnographic studies. In this regard, **Jiqing Dong** engages in self-reflexivity to tackle the uneasiness of an ethnographer's emotions vis-à-vis her positionality in the complex network of participants in a UK-based interpreting agency. The analysis of Dong's unsettled emotions alongside her shifting roles in the field allow her to describe the workplace in more depth, revealing everyday discrepancies and detailed contextual information. This confessional tale also exposes untrusted relationships between the ethnographer and the participants, which may occur even or especially when the ethnographer herself has become and is seen by other employees as a 'full' member of the organisation and a professional in the industry.

Methodologies and theories are not divorced from each other, but often share the same epistemological ground. In her article, **Shuang Li** integrates complexity theory with focused ethnography to examine translation policies for courtroom interactions with ethnic minorities who do not speak Chinese (including both Mandarin and other Chinese dialects) in China. Both ethnography and complexity theory allow the researcher to focus on the unexpected, thus '[representing] an epistemological shift from studying ... stability' (Marais 2014, 50). On the one hand, ethnographic fieldwork, at a methodological level, enables Li to collect data about a variety of sociological factors that affect court interactions. These include observing the trials as they take place, interviewing the judges, court interpreters, prosecutors and a people's assessor, and collecting and analysing official translation regulations regarding criminal trials. On the other hand, drawing on the notion of 'constraints' in complexity theory, she focuses on the relationships and interplay between these elements, which all play a role in shaping up the execution of translation policies. The findings reveal tensions between court interpreting practices, translation management and how the social actors involved perceive translating for ethnic minorities.

In line with expanding ethnography into a framework that encompasses epistemological, theoretical and methodological elements, **Julie Boéri** proposes an ethnographic framework to examine the actions of activist volunteer interpreters, the space where they work, and the identities of their networked community in both offline and online settings. In her contribution, Boéri adopts an interdisciplinary angle that draws on the perspective of postmodern ethnographies as well as socio-narrative theory. The author analyses her own 'personal narrative' and the origins of her involvement with Babels (a non-professional network of interpreting volunteers) in the European Social Forum, as well as the 'public narrative' of Babels and its relation to the Social Forum, and the 'professional narrative' of the elite interpreting community. The integration of a narrative analysis with ethnography shows us how the researcher's political identity is shaped, and how contested politics are negotiated among Babels' interpreters engaging in a transnational social movement whose aim is to make a change.

Cherine Haidar and **Lucía Ruiz Rosendo** have chosen to present ethnographic challenges through an impressionist tale – a reporting style that is seldom used in

ethnographic accounts (Van Maanen 2011). The reasons for this are that impressionist tales 'present the doing of fieldwork rather than the doer or the done' (*ibid.*: 102). In this case, this reporting style allows the authors to relegate both the ethnographer and the participants to the background, protecting their confidentiality in a delicate environment and focusing instead on events. In particular, an impressionist ethnography gives prominence to unusual events, which is the case of a conference interpreter leaving the booth and interpreting in a field mission deployed by an international organisation, observing and analysing this experience from a predominantly emic perspective. The article outlines various types of ethnographic accounts and demonstrates the advantages and characteristics of an impressionist tale in a field site that requires extreme confidentiality.

Rather than conducting an ethnography, **Iván Villanueva-Jordán** and **Marco Ramírez-Colombier** intersect translation with ethnography and anthropology by studying the translation of the ground-breaking ethnographic text entitled *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, authored by the American anthropologist Esther Newton in 1972. This essay occupies a significant position in both anthropological research and the history of gender studies, and has served as the foundation for the development of theories on gender performativity. In the context of translation studies, it is, according to the authors, the first and only ethnographic text on queer discourse that has a Spanish version (published in 2016). The translation of *Mother Camp* not only marks the introduction of queer and, in particular, of drag subcultural practice, into the Spanish context, but more profoundly, constitutes a re-representation of such discourse. In this article, the two authors examine textual differences between the source and target texts using qualitative content analysis. Additionally, they examine Newton's preface and tease out how issues of gender and sexuality are translated and received in the Spanish context. Their analysis shows an excessive use of domesticating strategies, which has undermined the experimental feature of Newton's ethnography and weakened the situated nature of her research.

5. Concluding remarks

This special issue aims to offer a contribution to the field of translation and interpreting studies by bringing together the most recent ethnographic research focusing on and connecting the two domains. While they cover diverse geo-linguistic areas, when taken as a whole the articles in this special issue underscore the need to understand ethnography not just as 'fieldwork', but as a comprehensive framework with distinct research values. In this introductory article, the historical mapping of ethnographic research in translation studies has demonstrated its late emergence as a promising area of inquiry since the 1990s. The collection of articles gathered here points towards the future of ethnography in translation studies: as a framework that uncovers otherwise intangible data, allows deeper understanding of context, promotes self-reflexivity and ethical integrity at various stages of the research process such as data collection, data analysis and writing-up, and fosters critical and recursive engagement with theory. We hope that this special issue will inspire further ethnographic explorations by translation studies scholars in domains as varied as the ones showcased in this collection.

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