Interpreting in the space-time continuum: the influence of latent networks

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The act of interpreting happens in the present, but interpreters are able to draw on knowledge acquired in the past to assist their performance. Watts (2003) describes how latent networks are created through previous shared experiences between interactants. This presentation explores how the work of interpreters working from British Sign Language (BSL) to English is informed by the interpreters’ involvement in latent networks with their clients. This paper suggests that the prior knowledge of the primary participants and interactional context afforded by latent networks facilitates interpretation that more accurately reflects the intention of the Deaf participant.

Data were collected through a series of semi-structured group discussions involving a total of eight highly experienced BSL/English interpreters. These sessions, with a particular focus on issues relating to the interpretation of linguistic politeness, incorporated video clips of Deaf signers making requests and apologies to stimulate discussion.

Participants described how involvement in latent networks may facilitate more accurate interpretation of their clients, as judgements made during the course of their work are informed by their knowledge of previous interactions, making the intent of the client easier to discern. This prior knowledge can then be transformed into present action, influencing choice of vocabulary, register and intonation in the target language. Data suggest that such networks allow interpreters to craft a more individually-tailored approach to their interpretations. Latent networks may not only benefit the clients, through enhanced interpreter-accuracy, but may also reduce mental fatigue for the interpreters themselves. Participants described how the assessment of an individual’s linguistic and behavioural norms while simultaneously interpreting the interaction generated additional cognitive load. Data therefore illustrate ways in which the past informs language use in the present.


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