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Court interpreting in Zimbabwe: a descriptive study of consecutively-interpreted rape trials in regional magistrates' courts

Svongoro, Paul Revai

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ABSTRACT

This is a linguistic investigation of English and Shona consecutively-interpreted rape trials heard in selected Regional Magistrates' courts in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwean magistrates' courts can be regarded as a special context because, in most trials, the court officials in an English-medium trial also speak the language(s) of the accused/witness, although they conduct the trial in the language of the court, i.e. English. In such a unique context, the interpreter is not the only bilingual participant. This is unlike many other bilingual settings where court officials do not speak the language of the accused/witness. Specifically, the study investigates the contention between, on the one hand, the impression of the role of the interpreter as a translating device, reflected in court interpreters' guidelines in Zimbabwe and, on the other hand, the reality of the interpreting situation. Focusing on the effect of additions and omissions on source language utterances, the study employs an interdisciplinary approach which draws from interpreting studies approaches, discourse analytic approaches and corpus-based interpreting studies to investigate interpreted courtroom discourse. The main source of data is question/answer transcripts of consecutively-interpreted rape trials heard at two regional magistrates' courts in Zimbabwe, making the study principally linguistic although it employs aspects of ethnography. Data from transcripts were supplemented by 92 hours of observation of open court proceedings and structured and semi-structured interviews with court interpreters, magistrates and public prosecutors. The findings presented in this study reveal that, because court interpreters are mindful that their primary goal is to ensure that participants fully understand each other's communicative intentions, they adopt a strategy for conveying renditions which would ensure that a speaker's communicative motive, and not only his/her actual words, is available to an end receipient. The resultant interpreted discourse thus reveals some additions and omissions which may impact on the propositional content and style of the source language message. It is possible to argue that the interpreters included these elements based on their intuitive reasoning. The study therefore argues that the presence of additions and omissions in the interpreters' renditions could be explained in terms of court interpreters' awareness of the importance of pragmatics and context. In this way, the interpreters' renditions, as confirmed by my findings, support the expectation that court interpreters are always mindful of the need to convey the speakers' meaning in full. The study therefore makes a special contribution, from an African point of view, to the debate on interpreters' role perception by advocating a move towards a more holistic account of dialogue interpreting encounters in which all features are taken into account so that the interpreter's role is better appreciated. The recommendations the study makes on how various stakeholders can work with interpreters will ultimately enhance the quality of interpreting service provision to ensure that the rights of the people for whom they interpret are safeguarded. Although the findings of this study are based on data from Zimbabwean courtrooms, many of the issues raised in this study would be of interest to other interpreter-mediated courtrooms.

Key words: consecutive interpreting, court interpreting, discourse analysis, role of the court interpreter