



Magdalena Bartłomiejczyk

# FACE THREATS IN INTERPRETING

A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF PLENARY DEBATES  
IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



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**Face threats in interpreting:  
A pragmatic study of plenary debates  
in the European Parliament**






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## Introduction

There is a time in the career of every academic when you are supposed to have authored a monograph. Although it is not an official requirement, it fits into the general “publish or perish” adage. The main problem with this, in my view, is the need to find proper balance between trying to publish mediocre works that have not been devoted enough blood, sweat and tears, and aspiring to create an *opus magnum*, something a scholar can genuinely be proud of as a pinnacle of his/her academic achievement. The latter option obviously seems much more noble; however, I have known some researchers so perfectionist in their attitude to writing that, due to endless additions and improvements, their books have actually never made it to the publishing house.

Mindful of this, I am aware of the need to consider a book finished at one point, and resist the temptations to still elaborate on this or that, and update the sources you are quoting to reflect the most current trends, and report on the newest article touching upon the field of your interest which has just appeared in a journal (or an older one that you have just stumbled upon), and triangulate your findings by means of yet another set of data or another research tool. Every author surely knows the feeling. Consequently, imperfect as it may be, this book is hereby declared finished. Certainly, it is far from exhausting the topic; however, it pictures my own state of knowledge at a certain moment in time (spring 2016, to be more precise, with some minor additions and alterations made throughout the second half of 2016). I explicitly refuse to treat it as my *opus magnum*, or even something remotely approaching the notion; rather, it is a milestone on a road which stretches far ahead. Hopefully, my academic career is not ending with this book, and I will still be able to elaborate on pragmatic aspects of interpreting in further works and to improve on my understanding of the topic. Although a few ideas and questions are already circulating in my mind, I particularly hope to find inspiration in possible feedback



from the interpreting studies community – and the only way to invite such feedback on any larger scale is to actually PUBLISH.

This book is not a compilation or reassessment of research that I have published elsewhere over years, although I have been presenting partial results and sharing my deliberations on the topic at some conferences in recent years and I am very grateful for insightful questions and comments (especially from the participants of *Interpreter-Mediated Interactions: Methodologies and Models* at LUSPIO University in Rome in November 2013) that helped to endow my fuzzy initial ideas with a more tangible form and reassured me that the topic was one arousing a lot of interest among the interpreting research community. Actually, my only previous paper that touches upon the topic is Bartłomiejczyk (2012), and the book is quite different from what I have been doing since the beginning of my academic career within the field of interpreting studies. I am therefore stepping out of my comfort zone, which could most succinctly be summarised as experimental research into simultaneous interpreting with interpreting trainees as participants (e.g., Bartłomiejczyk 2006; 2007; 2010).

The paradigm shift from experimental to observational research carried out on authentic interpreted discourse reflects my deep conviction gained over time that the latter can shed more light on simultaneous interpreting as a socially situated activity, inherently embedded in its communicative context. This view is shared by many professional interpreters, who worry about ecological validity of experiments, as they feel that, in the words of Daniel Gile (2000: 102),

important determinants of the interpreter's behaviour are only found in the 'real' professional situation, including a sense of professional responsibility, the awareness of certain expectations from colleagues and listeners, visual and other feedback from the clients and the floor as well as visual and other input from the interaction between the floor and the speakers and within the floor.

Therefore, observational research can claim more explanatory power than experimental studies, which is particularly true of experiments with the participation of students, whose performance may be significantly different than in the case of professionals (cf. Gile 1994: 44), and many of whom never even make it to the interpreting booth after graduating from the university. This is not to say that such experiments are devoid of any scientific value, especially for the needs of interpreter training. However, I believe that at present there is more to be gained from explorations in conference halls than in university interpretation labs

– especially considering the difference observational studies (such as Wadensjö 1998) have made to our understanding of liason interpreting.

My evolution as a researcher is, to some extent, parallel to the development of the field as such, which started with experimental studies around 1960s, and only stretched to corpus-based observational research much later, around the beginning of the new millennium. As rightly pointed out by Setton (2002: 29–30), this sequence seems awkward: “as a first step towards understanding interpreting processes or factors in quality, or establishing a theoretical basis for training, it seems reasonable to begin by observing and comparing original discourse and its interpreted versions.” In this sense, this book is something that I should have done some time ago (maybe at the point of writing my PhD thesis, defended in 2004) but was discouraged from actually doing by problematic accessibility of naturally occurring data (see, e.g., Shlesinger 1998). Once Poland entered the European Union and, some time afterwards, the European Parliament started placing its plenary debates on-line together with their interpretations into all the official languages, it became clear to me that this was the way to go.

In one of my favourite novels, *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson,<sup>1</sup> there is an episode in which the main character, Swede Allan Karlsson, by a strange turn of fate (one of so many in this delightfully hilarious novel) ends up in Moscow, having dinner with Stalin, the boss of the Soviet security Lavrenty Beria, and the head of the Soviet nuclear programme Yury Popov. Apart from the aforementioned, at the table sits “a little, almost invisible young man without a name and without anything either to eat or to drink” – the interpreter, and the others pretend he is not there at all, although he makes the friendly conversation possible in the first place. During the dinner, the amicable atmosphere is suddenly completely spoiled as Allan quotes an inappropriate, imperialist poet, and Stalin flies into a fury. Allan is immediately accused by his moody host of being a filthy capitalist and a long tirade results, which ends as follows:

‘I’ve been thinking,’ said Allan.

‘What,’ said Stalin angrily.

‘Why don’t you shave off that moustache?’

With that the dinner was over, because the interpreter fainted.

---

<sup>1</sup> First published in Swedish in 2009; the quotations here are from the English translation by Roy Bradbury.

Why should the interpreter have fainted? After all, this insolent suggestion (undoubtedly classifiable as a face-threatening act, and not just because it relates to facial hair) was not his own, he was “only” supposed to transfer it to Stalin from the originator, that is, Allan Karlsson. Surely he had no reason to feel responsible for the offensive content? Or did he? As a matter of fact, the job of Stalin’s non-fictional interpreters was indeed very dangerous, he is known to have had several of his interpreters executed by NKVD (Tryuk 2014: 9; Kahane 2007), although the reasons for this are far from clear.

The episode from Jonasson’s amusing novel illustrates very well the main question I will try to answer in this study: except fainting, what can the interpreter do when s/he is required to voice a statement that may likely offend the addressee (damage his/her face) and is, in fact, intended to do just this? As the character of my work is descriptive rather than prescriptive, I would like to avoid, as much as possible, a related question, one that frequently gets asked by interpreting students: what should the interpreter do in such a situation? At the same time, I can only agree with Mona Baker (Chesterman and Baker 2008: 12) when she says that “there is an element of prescription in *all* theoretical writing, however descriptive and ‘detached’ it attempts to be” (original emphasis).

In the material investigated for the needs of my research, the addressee is not a bloody dictator (fortunately for the interpreters), but the context remains strictly political. In fact, some of the addressees are very major political players, heads of the main European Union institutions, and others are mainly politicians, too. The speakers, likewise, are also politicians: Members of the European Parliament. To phrase it in more scientific terms, the field of my interest is interlingual transfer of pragmatic meaning, that is, what House (2000: 64) describes as “interpersonal equivalence,” and I focus on face-threatening acts and impoliteness.

Although parliaments are supposed to feature ‘parliamentary’ (i.e., polite, respectful, dignified, sophisticated) language, even casual observers of the political scene will realise that some speakers who take the floor there decisively fail to live up to this ideal. The European Parliament does not radically differ from various national parliaments as far as the content and the form of its plenary debates are concerned. It stands out, however, as a parliamentary assembly with extraordinarily many working languages, where participants of debates interact with each other with the help of numerous teams of simultaneous interpreters. It would be unreasonable to assume, therefore, that interpretation exerts no influence whatsoever on the debate as such.

The book starts with a general chapter meant to set the scene by briefly describing the European Union as a multilingual institution, with a special focus on translation and interpreting, their institution-specific character and the organisational units responsible for providing each of these services. In Chapter 2, the description narrows down on interpreting for the European Parliament, including such aspects of its plenary debates that may influence interpreting, either favourably or otherwise. In particular, this chapter is aimed to provide an overview of existing research on simultaneous interpreting in this very setting, independently of investigated language combinations and of research questions posed by the authors – although, naturally, more attention will be devoted to studies that explore pragmatic aspects. My ambition was to make this overview as exhaustive as possible, although I realise that some studies might have escaped me, especially unpublished theses (in spite of making every effort to trace all the developments, at least in the case of PhDs).

As you will notice by dates of publications reviewed in this chapter, research into various aspects of interpreting in the European Parliament, which a few years ago could easily have been called a niche topic, is a truly vibrant field at the moment, with many important contributions appearing very recently. Consequently, this book will probably not display as much originality as I hoped for when beginning to work on it. On the other hand, I am glad to know that it will be one of the many elements that quickly add up to form a multifaceted image of a unique setting that is likely to function as a paragon of simultaneous conference interpreting in many Europeans' minds.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the pragmatic background to my study, with the latter zooming in on pragmatics of interpreting. Both these chapters are much longer now than originally intended, and this is because as a newcomer to the field of pragmatics, I completely underestimated the complexity of the issues I was setting out to explore and the richness of relevant empirical research. Even in its present form, Chapter 3 hardly does justice to modern (im)politeness studies, but hopefully it is sufficient to shed light on the crucial concepts of *face*, *facework*, *face-threatening acts* and *impoliteness* that will continuously reappear in the analysis of my research material in Chapter 5. I also devote some attention to empirical research, of which research into cross-cultural pragmatics seems most relevant for translation studies. Finally, special emphasis is placed on selected pragmatically-oriented studies of parliamentary discourse, and I believe this is probably the only section that may contain anything novel for an average pragmatician. Otherwise, this chapter has been written more for the

sake of readers having a similar scholarly background as myself, that is, translation studies, and interpreting research in particular. Chapter 4, in turn, presents a review of existing research (on various modes of interpreting) dealing with facework as performed by interpreters, more likely to be old news to translation scholars than to linguists.

Chapter 5, by far the longest one, presents my own empirical study and therefore should be seen as the core of this book, offering the most “added value.” It starts with a detailed discourse-analytic exploration of five speeches and their interpretations into Polish, to proceed to an analysis of a considerably larger corpus of face-threatening parliamentary discourse that focuses on two selected aspects: personal reference and impoliteness. What is probably apparent from the beginning of this chapter is my persistent struggle to supplement the qualitative analyses of facework (as performed by original speakers and interpreters representing them) with some quantitative aspects that would offer explanatory potential as regards the phenomena that, admittedly, are hardly measurable. No doubt, this nagging belief in the value of numbers and percentages has much to do with my experimental research background. Finally, I did include a few quantitative elements into my analyses; however, it must be highlighted that there is a certain asymmetry between the two approaches, with the qualitative one constituting the methodological mainstay of the study. Whereas the qualitative description of possible interpreter reactions to face threats present in the source texts is well-grounded in the material and supported with adequate examples, any conclusions of quantitative character as to the relative frequency of the pragmatic shifts under investigation must be treated with much caution, and surely they should not be hastily extrapolated to “simultaneous interpreting in general.” In fact, given the limited representativeness of the corpus, I even hesitate to venture any generalisations going beyond the transfer of Eurosceptic discourse in the European Parliament by the Polish Language Unit.

As this book is no thriller, it will probably not qualify as a spoiler if I reveal now that the overall results point to a pronounced tendency towards mitigation of face attacks by the interpreter. This is not a great surprise, either, in view of previous research reported in Chapter 4. As noted by Mason (2004: 93), in community interpreting, “[t]he interpreter’s mitigation of perceived threats to face is well documented [...], whether the face redress is done for the sake of the speaker, the hearer or the interpreter herself.” However, the simultaneous interpreter’s role (almost devoid of the coordinating function, *inter alia*) makes for a different array of interpreting strategies, which I have tried to discuss

extensively and illustrate with numerous examples from the corpus. Chapter 6 is a direct follow-up, endeavouring to show a few diverse options of how this phenomenon of mitigation might be explained within the wide framework of translation studies.

The last issue I would like to explain here is the fact that I am not an EU interpreter myself. Understandably, I considered the idea of becoming one around the time Poland was entering the European Union, but decided against it, for a number of reasons, mostly personal, and, as of now, I am perfectly happy with this decision (although I do not preclude that I might want to take the accreditation tests at some time in the future). Therefore, the position of an EU interpreter is not an unfulfilled dream for me, and I have not set out on this research in order to vent my frustration by criticising the performance of those who have attained it. On the contrary, I have great respect for interpreters working for the European Parliament and the other EU institutions, whether they are Polish or of any other nationality. I am also far from claiming that any of the solutions affecting facework that I discuss in Chapter 5 are “wrong” from an ethical or procedural or any other point of view, or that I would have handled a challenge that this type of speech poses completely differently, and better, had I been in that booth at the time. For the benefit of potential readers who are not well-acquainted with interpreting, it seems necessary to briefly mention at this point that interpreters get to play by a completely different set of rules than translators; their work inherently involves great cognitive strain, and, therefore, transcripts of their oral output (larger fragments of which are provided in the Appendix, and shorter ones – throughout Chapter 5) should definitely not be judged against the standards of written translation.

Whether or not personal experience as an EU interpreter endows a researcher with a better position to analyse interpreting as practiced in plenary sessions of the European Parliament is, certainly, a complex question. As we will see in Chapter 2, many scholars who have engaged in research in this setting so far, and especially authors of more extensive studies, are, in fact, also a part of the EU interpreting services. Beyond doubt, both the insider and the outsider status have some advantages and disadvantages. For instance, as an outsider I obviously have to rely on information from other authors as far as the realia of work at the European Parliament are concerned, and I might miss some important organisational details that have a bearing on the interpreter’s performance. On the other hand, a vantage point situated at a considerable distance gives me the benefit of detachment, and, hopefully, a less subjective perspective enabled by the lack of emotional

involvement with the participants (whom I do not know personally) or any loyalty to the scrutinised institution as such.

Having outlined the aims I wish to achieve and clarified my present position as a researcher, now it remains for me to hope that this book finds interested and reflective readership among the interpreting research community and, perhaps, also among pragmaticians. As I have already indicated, feedback (also criticism, naturally) is welcome, even more so because in spite of this book being finished, I still regard the project itself as work in progress, to be continued soon.

Magdalena Bartłomiejczyk

## **Face threats in interpreting: A pragmatic study of plenary debates in the European Parliament**

### **S u m m a r y**

This monograph focuses on pragmatic aspects of simultaneous interpreting, and is therefore intended both for translation scholars and for linguists interested in interlingual transfer of pragmatic meaning. Efforts have been made to avoid dense, strictly scientific language and the use of unexplained specialist terminology in the hope that the book might also appeal to practicing interpreters and interpreter trainees, although it should be noted that its character is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The main problem under discussion is how simultaneous interpreters handle face-threatening acts and impoliteness directed by politicians at their opponents, and the authentic material under analysis comes from plenary debates of the European Parliament, which are routinely interpreted into all the official languages of the European Union.

Chapters 1–4 are meant to set the scene. Chapter 1 presents the European Union as a multilingual institution, with a special focus on its translation and interpreting services. Chapter 2 zooms in on the latter, considering such features of plenary debates of the European Parliament that have direct consequences for interpreting, and also including an overview of existing research on interpreting for the needs of various EU bodies. Chapter 3 provides the pragmatic background to the study, shedding light especially on the crucial notions of “face,” “facework,” “face-threatening acts” and “impoliteness,” while Chapter 4 reviews existing research on facework performed by interpreters in various settings and interpreting modes.

The author’s empirical contribution is presented in Chapter 5, which scrutinises Polish interpretations of British Eurosceptics’ plenary speeches, in particular ones that fiercely attack and possibly offend the speakers’ political opponents. Five speeches undergo detailed discourse analysis covering all identifiable aspects of facework as performed by the original speaker and the interpreter, whereas a considerably larger corpus of source texts and the corresponding interpretations is analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively in terms of personal reference and impoliteness. The interpretations are searched, first and foremost, for signs of interpreting strategies at play during transfer of face-threatening input. Many of these strategies result in mitigation of the originally intended impoliteness. Chapter 6 develops this topic, endeavouring to find multifarious explanations of the pronounced trend towards mitigation by the interpreter within the wide framework of modern translation studies. Both this chapter and the final conclusions devote much attention to avenues for future research that would offer some possibilities of triangulating and complementing the results of the present study.



Magdalena Bartłomiejczyk

## Zagrożenia twarzy w tłumaczeniu ustnym: pragmatyczne studium debat plenarnych w Parlamencie Europejskim

### Streszczenie

Niniejsza monografia skupia się na pragmatycznych aspektach tłumaczenia symultanicznego i jest adresowana zarówno do przekładoznawców, jak i do językoznawców zainteresowanych międzyjęzykowym transferem znaczenia pragmatycznego. Autorka starała się unikać hermetycznego, ściśle naukowego języka oraz niejasnej terminologii specjalistycznej w nadziei, że książka może również zainteresować praktykujących tłumaczy ustnych oraz adeptów zawodu, chociaż należy podkreślić, że ma ona charakter opisowy, a nie poradnikowy. Głównym tematem są sposoby, w jakie tłumacze symultaniczni podchodzą do aktów zagrożenia twarzy oraz niegrzeczności wobec oponentów w wypowiedziach polityków. Analizowany materiał badawczy pochodzi z debat plenarnych Parlamentu Europejskiego, które są zawsze tłumaczone na wszystkie oficjalne języki unijne.

Rozdziały 1–4 stanowią wprowadzenie do zasadniczych wątków rozwijanych w pracy. Rozdział 1 przedstawia Unię Europejską jako instytucję wielojęzyczną, skupiając się szczególnie na służbach odpowiedzialnych za zapewnienie tłumaczeń pisemnych oraz ustnych. To właśnie tłumaczenia ustne awansują do rangi głównego tematu w rozdziale 2, który omawia aspekty debat plenarnych w Parlamencie Europejskim o pierwszorzędym znaczeniu dla tłumaczy, jak również prezentuje przegląd wcześniejszych badań nad tłumaczeniami ustnymi na potrzeby różnych instytucji unijnych. Rozdział 3 omawia niezbędne zagadnienia pragmatyczne oraz wyjaśnia kluczowe terminy: „twarz”, „czynności twarzy”, „akty zagrożenia twarzy” i „niegrzeczność”. Rozdział 4 natomiast referuje badania innych autorów nad czynnościami twarzy w przykładzie ustnym wykonywanym w rozmaitych okolicznościach i z zastosowaniem różnych technik tłumaczeniowych.

Badanie empiryczne stanowiące trzon niniejszej monografii przedstawiono w obszernym rozdziale 5, który poświęcony jest autentycznym tłumaczeniom symultanicznym na język polski wystąpień plenarnych brytyjskich eurosceptyków. Szczególnie interesujące w kontekście tej pracy są przemówienia, których autorzy w niewybredny sposób atakują swoich oponentów politycznych i potencjalnie ich obrażają. Pięć przemówień tego typu poddawanych jest szczegółowej analizie dyskursu, obejmującej wszystkie możliwe do wyodrębnienia aspekty czynności twarzy ze strony mówcy oryginalnego oraz tłumacza. Znacznie większy korpus tekstów oryginalnych oraz ich tłumaczeń symultanicznych stanowi natomiast podstawę do szerszej zakrojonej analizy o charakterze zarówno jakościowym, jak i ilościowym, skupiającej się na dwóch aspektach: odniesieniach do osób oraz niegrzeczności. Tłumaczenia są analizowane

przede wszystkim pod kątem strategii tłumaczeniowych zastosowanych w celu przekazania zawartych w tekstach oryginalnych zagrożeń twarzy. Wiele ze zidentyfikowanych w materiale badawczym strategii skutkuje mitygowaniem zamierzonej przez mówcę niegrzeczności wobec odbiorcy. Rozdział 6 kontynuuje i rozwija ten temat, przedstawiając w świetle współczesnej translatoryki szereg różnorodnych interpretacji ukazanego trendu ku mitygowaniu ataków werbalnych przez tłumacza. Zarówno ten rozdział, jak i wnioski końcowe poświęcają również wiele uwagi potencjałowi dla dalszych badań, oferujących możliwość triangulacji i uzupełnienia przedstawionych tutaj wyników.



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