

Title: Book Review. *Figures of Interpretation* B.A.S.S. Meier-Lorente-Muth-Duchêne. Writing Without Borders Series. Bristol & Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters, 2021. 180 pp., £29.95 (hbk) ISBN 9781788929394, £5.00 (e-book, pdf) ISBN 9781788929400.

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The book *Figures of interpretation* constitutes an unorthodox and moving exploration of the ‘interpreter’ – a figure found across the globe and across time, operating within a vast network of material and linguistic conditions. Vividly illustrated by the evocative drawing of Nino Paula Bulling, the volume brings together 31 memorable portraits of ‘people who interpret’.

The book consists of a succession of short (2-3 page) narrative vignettes, each introducing a different ‘figure’. Amongst them, we meet Aïcha, a professional journalist working in the Middle East and North Africa, who uses her mediation skills in Arabic, French, and English to bring visibility to war victims, as part of her work for an international humanitarian agency. Conrad, an immigrant to the US, born in Württemberg in 1696, assists on Indian Affairs in Pennsylvania, occasionally taking sides, sometimes interpreting in peril of his life. Fatima, a nine-and-a-half-year-old Moroccan immigrant child in South Spain, deftly uses her resourceful communication skills to carry out medical interpreting. Serbian-born Darko is a PhD philosophy student in Switzerland. He works as a flexible freelance medical interpreter to support himself throughout his studies while often musing on the systemic oppressions he observes on the job, the exploitation of interpreters’ labour, and their complicated role as facilitators.

Each portrait moves and brings forward the ethical dilemmas, the risk, and the toll of mediating interactions for others. But each also highlights that opportunities arise for those able, “in fraught contact zones”, “to negotiate, contest and even transcend borders” (García-Sánchez 2023: 71). Curated together, the juxtaposition of portraits makes vividly clear how valuation of language work intersect with ethnicity, class, gender, and economic, social and geopolitical conditions.

The book is edited by a certain B.A.S.S Meier-Lorente-Muth-Duchêne, ‘who works in academia’<sup>1</sup>; in reality, a quadriga of critical sociolinguists who have chosen for the occasion to use a collective name and efface themselves in the service of the individual authors of the portraits. In a brief but rich introduction, Meier-Lorente-Muth-Duchêne recaps what sparked the project, how the portraits were gathered, and the struggles and the joy experienced along the way. It presents the book’s main thesis, that linguistic facilitation work is ubiquitous but also almost always transparent. And yet, if we zone in on this work, there is much to be learned about the structures of society and hierarchical distributions of power, since interpreters often act at points where individual trajectories and social, political, economic, or institutional forces interact. In curating the portraits, the authors thus sought not just to produce knowledge about ‘people who interpret’ but also ‘to access and better understand larger structural processes through the singularity of individual trajectories’ (xvii). The introduction also alludes briefly to the decision to break away from ‘peer-reviewed articles that rely on theory, methodology, and the usual claim to authorship of countable publications on which academic careers are

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<sup>1</sup> See Author biography. <https://www.multilingual-matters.com/page/detail/?k=9781788929394>

built' (p.xvi). It reflects on why the editor saw it fit to adopt a new kind of format to capture language inequalities.

Beyond this introduction, the editor stands back. There is little explanation about what instructions were given to the authors, what the reader should make of the individual narratives, or what could be an interesting order to approach them. The editor, for example, offers not one, but four different tables of contents. In several ways, the reader is invited to work out – rather than being told – what they want to make of the collection, thus becoming powerful figures of interpretation themselves (p. xx).

Where I found the book perhaps most thought-provoking, however, is as an unorthodox piece of academic writing, inviting deep reflection on the politics of writing, knowledge production, and collaborative work.

The book entertains an original and productive tension when it comes to its academic positionality. On the one hand, for example, the book is published as part of the *Writing without Borders* series, an imprint dedicated to publishing writing and thinking that challenges the orthodoxies of traditional academic discourse. The editor also spells out in their introduction that one of their aims is to break away from traditional academic standards for writing. To some extent, the book fulfills that aim: it uses the narrative form without drawing conclusions or contextualizing the process—making the text atypical of academia. It does not rely explicitly on carefully formulated theory and methodology, and gives few hints as to how the project was conceptualized in the first place. All they tell us is that it was a moment incidental to fieldwork that triggered reflections around how interpreting work is valued, the editor used a snowball technique to identify possible authors or topics for the vignettes, and the common threads and contrast between the figures became so complex to abstract that the editor chose not attempting to do so.

On the other hand, one cannot shake the feeling that the book also sits firmly within academia. For example, the book was produced by researchers that have years of working on language and social inequalities under their belt. Many of them have a researcher's habitus of collecting data from an ethnographic perspective. While the narrative form might have been a step outside of the authors' comfort zone, it was also not the complete pivot other researchers have made in translating their work into novels, comics, gestured conferences, poetry, films, or other media, as modes of disseminating results to larger audiences.

I was also less certain than another reviewer (Sadler 2021) that the text did not create scholarly understanding. Rather, I saw it as inscribing itself in the long line of academic work that reflects on the relations between writing and knowledge production, and that questions what is conveyed and what is lost when we normalize and standardize writing in academia (Van Maanen, 1995, Becker 2007). When we assess research, we often ask questions such as: is the research question innovative? Is the data unique or new? Is the methodology bringing a different angle? But we often do not ask ourselves any questions about the impact of writing and composition on the production of new distinctions and meanings. We also rarely question the researcher's role as a writer. Are we still to be considered researchers when we swap the kind of writing that is acceptable in our field for that of another genre when presenting our data and observations? What happens when the researcher does not see it as their role to volunteer an interpretation, but instead to compose and juxtapose, standing out of the way to let the reader create their own meaning? *Figures of Interpretation* challenges sociolinguists and critical

discourse analysts to reflect on what writing, genre, and semiotic form do to thinking, understanding, and knowledge production.

The book also shines a light on the occasional necessity to find the form that corresponds to the problem we are trying to tackle. If we have a truly fierce drive to make sense of something, we might need to start from different premises than usual. For example, one enduring question of interest for critical sociolinguistics is how we can capture, understand, and make visible structural inequalities empirically. By moving away from minute details of language analysis, and by instead focusing on situations – the point where individual trajectories and social norms/structure/economic/political/social context interact – we might find ways to capture enduring inequalities and make them visible for comprehension. The book suggests that the editor might have found a new way of engaging in ethnographic research. While a large number of ethnographies are ‘place-based’, or ‘group/community-based’, ‘mono-sited’ or ‘multi-sited’, the book offers an innovative avenue: a ‘figure-based’ or ‘concept-based’ ethnography which could offer significant benefits to the field if it were to become a tool in the ethnographer’s belt.

Finally, the book questions the notion of producing knowledge as a collective. One striking dimension of the book is the range of situations the narrative covers. The vignettes take us from school to hospital, courts to refugee camps, workplaces to film festivals, and across an array of geographic contexts both North and South. The narrative themselves are sometimes personal, first-person accounts, sometimes jointly written with the figure, or told in the third-person perspective. Yet, there is also a strong unity to the project brought about by the notion of the figure of interpretation. I kept thinking that while research often focuses on depth, and ‘intension’, extension and breadth also offered here their own possibilities. It is in the kaleidoscope of stories, in their stripping out of the usual academic apparatus, and in the telling of more sensuous and vivid accounts that new insights emerge and that the reader might be moved to rethink their perspectives on social inequalities and interpretation work. One would probably be hard-pressed to find an agency that would have accepted to fund at the outset a collective project designed in this very way. Yet, it is because the authors all accepted to step outside of their usual claims to methodology, theory, and analysis – and because they bring their voices together – that they manage to spark a new conversation for the field.

In the end, what shines perhaps clearest through this book is how, occasionally, writing and engaging with ideas within our field in a slightly atypical way can be important. Not just to disrupt capitalist knowledge production, but also because when we repeat orthodoxies, we tend to freeze our thinking and end up reproducing fossilized models. Changing form from time to time, then, might be also a way to go back to our own work reinvigorated and with a better understanding of how every genre has its potential and limitations for exploring ideas, making meaning, questioning and crafting knowledge, and communicating the new, complex understandings our research generates. As I was reading, I started wishing for a companion volume, where the editor and authors would articulate what working in this genre did to them. How did they feel, for, example about the paradox of writing for an academic press – with its inherent participation in the commodification of knowledge – while simultaneously questioning the neoliberal institutional framework? This paradox could certainly be discussed further. The challenging positions academic authors find themselves in probably deserve to be articulated, perhaps grieved. Also, the genre chosen begs questions about the intended audience: what readers did the authors have in mind when writing their texts and did they find heuristic or expressive value in assuming more subjectivity than normally found in more traditional academic papers? Finally, the assumption of a subjective position seemed to change

which ‘rich moments’ of fieldwork the authors decided to talk about but also seemed to change the definition of what counts as field site or fieldwork. Perhaps there are important academic stakes in directly addressing those questions, in a way that the current format does not allow for. If alternative forms of writing offer new ways of producing knowledge, a more detailed explanation of the process, concerns and experiences might help other researchers find easier ways to incorporate the authors’ insights into their own work.

In the meantime, through the figures presented here, the book seems to me to offer hope – hope that beyond inequalities and the individualistic, productivist context which disempowers many people, there is also a social net. There is a network of people who care for others, knit relations, understand oppression from below, and weave new forms of expression. Maybe listening to what this social net has to say, the experience it has gathered, not only raises new questions, but shows us a path to new values and actions.

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