Translation and Interpreting in the Age of COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities

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Chapter 1
Translation and Interpreting in the Age of COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities

Kanglong Liu and Andrew K. F. Cheung

Abstract This introductory chapter provides a detailed overview of how COVID-19 has impacted on translation and interpreting (T&I) practice, teaching and research. While recognizing the challenges and threats imposed by COVID-19, this chapter also highlights the opportunities brought on by this unprecedented pandemic. Specifically, COVID-19 has served as a catalyst for accelerating the adoption of technology in both T&I practice and teaching. Following the overview of the key issues facing T&I in the context of COVID-19, we have given a brief summary of the contributions selected for this edited volume. It is hoped that by providing first hand accounts of T&I research and practice across different nations in the age of COVID-19, we are able to paint a more complete and clearer picture of the impact the pandemic is having on T&I.

Keywords Translation · Interpreting · COVID-19 · Pandemic · Challenges and opportunities · Translation teaching · Technology

1.1 Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) which began as a health crisis has quickly turned into a social and economic crisis (Liu et al. 2020). COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the way people work, socialize, interact and notably communicate with other people (Sikali 2020). With the lockdowns and quarantine measures imposed to contain the spread of the virus, globalization faces perhaps the toughest test in decades (Gössling, Scott, and Hall 2020; Shrestha et al. 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is a major public health emergency that has had a great impact on people's health, but it is also a political, social, economic, and humanitarian

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crisis that has brought fundamental change. Undoubtedly, this crisis is limiting many aspects of our lives, including how we form and maintain relationships, how we learn and work with one another, and the context in which we live and make choices. People have to find ways to adapt to the "new normal" where virtual interaction has replaced face-to-face interaction to become the chief mode of communication in both social and professional settings. While the changes are challenging, they have also brought new opportunities, compelling people to engage in technological innovation and embrace transformation.

COVID-19 is a global pandemic that poses a serious public health threat to the human world in this globalization age. In this sense, communication, particularly multilingual communication, plays an increasingly crucial role in addressing the various issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019, substantial health and medical research has been conducted to study the symptoms and treatment of COVID-19, whereas relatively little has been done to examine issues from the perspective of language and communication (Declercq and Federici 2020). As an important means of facilitating interpersonal and intercultural communication, the role of translation and interpreting (T&I) in coping with this global pandemic remains underexplored. It should be noted that when facing such a severe global-scale health crisis, social and economic inequalities between countries and communities have been greatly exacerbated by a lack of information, and outright misinformation and disinformation rampant on social media platforms. Communication, especially multilingual communication facilitated by T&I, is essential. Thus, to address the many challenges brought by the global pandemic, it is important to investigate and understand the role of T&I in this process, which cover issues such as assisting medical professionals to learn from their peers, providing the public, especially minorities and marginalized communities with the proper information to combat the virus, and even the use of translation technology for obtaining COVID-related information. It is no exaggeration to claim that T&I has been at the forefront in facing these new challenges brought by the global pandemic.

1.2   Impact of COVID-19 on Translation and Interpreting

Under the impact of COVID-19, T&I as an industrial practice and also a teaching and research field has also faced great changes and serious difficulties. Translation activities lessened as a result of the reduction of industrial and commercial activities and limitation of movement. Remote interpreting has replaced on-site interpreting as most meetings are conducted by remote communication and forbid in-person attendance. Translation and interpreting classes are held virtually through ZOOM video conferencing or other online tools. These are just some of the impacts faced by T&I. As more contagious COVID-19 variants emerge, the world remains vulnerable—particularly in a highly connected society such as we live in today, implying that it

is highly unlikely for human society to return to pre-COVID days. To a large extent, the practical and emotional challenges that people are facing will continue to have a significant impact on T&I practitioners, researchers, teachers and students.

The COVID-19 epidemic has impacted most occupations. Many businesses have switched to online or remote operations in order to adapt to the changing business environment. The translation profession is no exception. According to a survey conducted by the French professional association SFT (*Société française des traducteurs*) from mid-June to mid-July 2020 (Chaillou and Van Der Kallen 2020), 57% agreed that the pandemic would have a negative influence on their work. Of this group of people, 48% believed they would take on an extra job, 23% were thinking of retraining, 15% were considering suspending their work for a temporary period of time and 7% were thinking of leaving the translation profession permanently. This shows that the translation profession has clearly been affected by the pandemic as business activities slowed with the impact of control measures to curb COVID-19.

As pandemic-related information is not evenly distributed across languages of the world (Lee and Wang 2022: 2), the role of translation has become even more crucial and complicated in this age of information explosion, where people may be exposed to both true and false information about the epidemic. The values and conflicts reflected in the different approaches and control measures adopted by different countries to deal with the virus inevitably manifest themselves in translation. The lack of COVID-related information provided to minority groups has also become an issue in a time when communities have become multicultural and multiethnic due to globalization (see the paper by Yu Kit Cheung of this volume for a detailed discussion). This situation may be greatly exacerbated by a lack of information on epidemic prevention in their own language for immigrants who continue to receive information from their home countries that advocate different measures to prevent and control the epidemic. Many Asian countries have imposed mask-wearing mandates since the beginning of COVID-19 while mask-wearing has remained a controversial issue in the west. As COVID has evolved, social distancing and mask-wearing guidelines for example may change in some jurisdictions. Confusion due to different coronavirus prevention practices and measures is expected to continue into the future while the virus remains active. An example of such confusion is that of Chinese immigrants or students who are still wearing white protective suits at many airports which sets them apart from others around them. Translation clearly has a larger role to play in such settings.

This pandemic has not only had an impact on professional translation practice and services, but the disruption is also felt in the translation classroom as well. The world was forced to switch to remote working and learning in response to the pandemic. Such a transition has caught many teachers and students unprepared, both emotionally and logistically. With increased use of an online teaching mode, interaction in the translation classroom has been largely reduced. When faced with a screen, the teacher has little control over student participation or responses. This is also the case with interpreting teaching. Interpreting classes have traditionally been interactive in nature, with different practice sessions simulating actual interpreting settings. Some interpreter-trainers and trainees have found it difficult to adjust to the

sudden shift from in-person teaching to remote teaching. Additionally, some trainers might find it challenging to engage students during classes, while some students also face difficulties in focus.

Interpreting has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, chiefly because of lockdowns and travel restrictions. The United Nations (UN) General Assembly recognizes multilingualism as a core value, which is manifested in its provision of simultaneous interpreting in six official languages at most of its open meetings, among others (Song and Cheung 2019; Ma and Cheung 2020; Wu et al. 2021). However, SI services were suspended because of technical constraints during COVID-19 induced lockdowns in New York, where the UN headquarters is located. Consequently, the UN Security Council conducted its daily meetings remotely and only in English for as long as a month or so before implementing remote interpreting (Cheung 2022). That the UN could conduct its daily meetings relying solely on English without the involvement of interpreters is a wakeup call for interpreters and interpreter-trainees. Remote interpreting, especially remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI), has revolutionized the way interpreters work. Remote conferences have democratized conference attendance as speakers and attendants are no longer limited by expensive travel costs. Furthermore, differences in geographical locations and time zones are no longer a concern for conference attendance. Similarly, interpreters could work for events taking place in different countries without having to travel. However, when working from home, the reliability of internet connection and unwanted noise could be among the top concerns. Besides, unless interpreters work from a hub, those working from home would no longer experience continuous interaction with colleagues throughout the working day. Gone are the days when interpreters could gesture to seek help or a turn taking.

An interpreter's role may no longer be limited to only serving the purpose of immediate communication. For remote interpreting and hybrid events with some remote speakers and some attending in person, the *modus operandi* may also be challenging. Speakers located in time zones far away from that of the conference may choose to provide pre-recorded presentations. After receiving these recordings, interpreters may use different tools to extract their audio tracks and automatically produce the transcripts to be translated into the target language. The interpreters would then read the translated scripts during the SI process, in a manner similar to dubbing. One of the motivating factors behind implementing this could be that some conference organizers choose to archive their renditions to be later accessed by attendants who could not attend the event live. The interpreters' output, therefore, would no longer be just transient audio signals, but records that could be scrutinized openly.

The pandemic, which has wreaked havoc on people in many ways, has also been a catalyst for technological innovation and adoption. Although the use of translation technology such as corpora and machine translation has been extensively discussed and applied in translation and interpreting teaching (Liu 2015, 2020; Liu et al. 2022), the use of other types of technology such as online platforms and computer-assisted technology was less touched upon in the pre-COVID era. Notwithstanding the various impacts the epidemic has brought, it has accelerated the digitization and adoption

of technology in human society. The need to navigate change and continuity is the key to the future of translation and interpreting. English will continue to dominate the global linguistic landscape, while remote teaching is anticipated to persist even after COVID-19. However, our desires to understand and be understood remains unchanged. The relevance of translators and interpreters as well as T&I trainers and trainees will be determined by how they adapt to the post-COVID-19 new normal. The changes and turbulence brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic will no doubt continue to impact on translation and interpreting in the post-COVID era.

1.3   The Current Volume

Against such a background, it is necessary as well as urgent to re-examine the role of T&I in this unstable, uncertain and highly polarized era. This current volume aims to bring together the views and voices of how T&I has responded and adapted to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The book presents the insights and observations of T&I researchers, practitioners, teachers and students, as well as the trends and issues shaping and shaped by the changing practice and new conceptualizations of T&I against the backdrop of COVID-19. In the studies brought together in this edited volume, T&I scholars from varied backgrounds have examined in their empirical studies a plethora of issues such as translation of vaccine metaphors, use of machine translation to evaluate COVID-related health information, remote simultaneous interpreting and humanitarian interpreting during the COVID period and also the adoption of new technology and tools to aid T&I teaching in the wake of the outbreak of the pandemic. These contributions not only show researchers' understanding of the importance of T&I to cope with COVID, but also their concern and awareness regarding how teaching methods and learning environment have changed as a result of the pandemic. The volume is divided into three sections, each covering a research area, namely, (1) Reconceptualising Translation in the Age of COVID-19; (2) Reconceptualising Interpreting in the Age of COVID-19; and (3) Translation and Interpreting Teaching in the Age of COVID-19. The studies included in this volume, which covers current key issues emerging from COVID-19, will make a valuable contribution to T&I studies, but also the expanding scholarly discourse of COVID-19 and the impact it brings to the humanities.

The first section is devoted to "Reconceptualising Translation in the Age of COVID-19". As a major form of communication enabling people from different linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds to effectively share knowledge and information, translation clearly plays a crucial role to mitigate the spread of the pandemic. This involves the transfer of correct information, promote understanding between different countries and communities, and also help underprivileged groups and minorities find the right information to make decisions regards COVID. In this volume, the section devoted to the investigation of the connection between translation and COVID-19 opens with a paper by **Yufeng Liu** and **Dechao Li.** The authors investigate the metaphor transfer in Chinese/English news headlines to show

the different stance mediation adopted by a Chinese and a British news outlet in re(framing) COVID-19 discourse. Drawing on an analytical model that integrates framing, corpus linguistics and appraisal theories, the authors reveal that the two news outlets differ significantly in the use of conceptual metaphors, framing strategies and also attitudinal graduation. While *The Global Times Editorial* takes a pro-China and anti-US stance, *The Economist Global Business Review* (EGBR) adopts an anti-China and pro-US perspective. The study has highlighted the different narratives regards China and the United States that emerged from the different preventive and control measures implemented by respective countries to cope with COVID. It can be seen from their study that some tensions and conflicts between the two countries in relation to COVID control practices are reflected in the translation of the COVID-related metaphors of the respective media organizations. **Chonglong Gu**'s paper examines how translation and multilingual communication have been mobilized to facilitate communication in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 public health crisis. To this end, the author analyses in depth both the top-down (official and government-led) and bottom-up (e.g. by individuals and small businesses) translation materials collected from various platforms and formats. The author has highlighted the crucial role of translation and multilingual text production in disseminating information and promoting awareness in ethnically and culturally diverse multilingual communities. By examining Chinese translations of the UK Government's guidance and regulations for the public, **Yu Kit Cheung** problematises the notion of Chinese translation in the context of the United Kingdom. The author found that these texts deviated from the defining features of "Chinese" in one way or another, thereby affecting the efficiency of communication. In general, the majority of Chinese translations only exist in simplified Chinese script subsumed under the generic term, whereas traditional Chinese versions were not available until early 2022. Considering that a Cantonese-speaking population makes up a measurable portion of the UK population, the lack of translation into traditional Chinese necessarily affects access to reliable anti-epidemic information for this cohort. The study has underscored the importance of quality translation in a proper language script to aid minorities in a multicultural country in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic. The section ends with a paper by **Sai Cheong Siu** in which he investigates the performance of COVID-19 MT Evaluator, a platform for the evaluation of machine translation of public health information related to the pandemic. COVID-19 is a global-scale pandemic, thus the information related to COVID is naturally presented in different languages. To keep the public informed of the latest pandemic situation and enable people of different linguistic communities to work together to combat the pandemic requires timely and accurate translation. The availability of machine translation (MT) can clearly play a role in this process. It is with this in mind that the author systematically compared two English/Chinese MT products provided by Google Translate to illustrate the use of the evaluation platform. His study has shown that the evaluation platform can help medical translators, healthcare professionals, researchers and developers for quick assessment of MT performance given its performance. This study has demonstrated that MT can play a helpful role in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and public health emergencies.

The second section titled "Reconceptualising Interpreting in the Age of COVID-19" contains six papers that examine the role and status of interpreting in the context of the pandemic. The section begins with **Andrew K. F. Cheung**'s paper in which he examines the use of remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) from a hub or home. By conducting an empirical experiment, he compared the RSI quality of English into Mandarin Chinese by interpreters working from a hub compared to that of interpreters working from home. He found that the performance of the hub group had better performance in interpreting numbers by using more approximation strategy than the home group. The results also show that the hub group experienced a lower perceived cognitive load than the home group, suggesting that the interpreting setting is of vital importance for interpreters' performance. In a similar vein, **Marta Buján** and **Camille Collard** discuss how conference interpreters perceive remote simultaneous interpreting in the context of COVID-19. To this end, they conducted a survey between March and April 2021, one year into the pandemic, gathering data from 849 respondents from 19 countries. It was found that conference interpreters have adapted to the new working environment by developing new working habits, such as shorter shifts and flexible ways to handle handover. Their study reveal that the interpreters are largely consistent in their assessment and perception of the various challenges and constraints of RSI. Besides, interpreters working in the private market are generally more optimistic about the benefits of RSI than those working in professional organizations who seem to have a more conservative view. Notwithstanding the challenges and opportunities brought by RSI, many interpreters believe that RSI as a necessary evil it's here to stay. Their study has demonstrated that interpreting as a profession, like other business areas, has embraced technological innovation to sustain against the onslaught of the pandemic. The paper by **Marie Diur** and **Lucía Ruiz Rosendo** addresses how COVID-19 has greatly changed the working and testing procedures of conference interpreting at the United Nations. Based on archival analysis and their own experience, they have shown that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote interpreting. In line with this new arrangement, the UN has also adopted online testing procedures to recruit new interpreters. By analyzing and elaborating on the changes and challenges taking place in conference interpreting at the UN, the authors have provided a contextual and nuanced description of the challenges facing interpreters and interpreter trainers working in international organizations in the context of COVID-19. In the fourth paper in this section, **Lucía Ruiz Rosendo** and **Maura Radicioni** focus on the issue of humanitarian interpreting, which is a new and emerging discipline within Translation and Interpreting Studies. The authors provide some background information on this area and address some important issues and challenges that interpreters working in humanitarian organizations face in this COVID health crisis. Still within the field of remote interpreting, **Márta Seresi** and **Petra Láncos** conducted semi-structured interviews with trained conference interpreters to investigate how cooperation and communication between simultaneous interpreters change when interpreters work using RSI platforms. Their results show that most interpreters have decided not to cooperate because of difficulties such as unsmooth handover or ineffectiveness to

help the active partner. Despite the difficulties, they come up with alternative strategies to handle many of the problems. Finally, **Deborah Giustini** explores the role of technology in remote interpreting in the context of COVID-19 using a sociological perspective rooted in practice theory. Based on data collected from language industry sources and surveys, the author examines how technology has reshaped and problematized interpreting. Her study sheds light on some of the emerging issues in the field and makes us rethink communication that is mediated as well as constrained by technology.

The third section titled "Translation and Interpreting Teaching in the Age of COVID-19" is concerned with T&I teaching which has been significantly impacted by COVID-19. **Kanglong Liu, Ho Ling Kwok** and **Wenjing Li**'s paper focuses on how students perceive the hybrid teaching mode in the translation classroom, which allows face-to-face and online teaching modes that students can choose between to attend in view of their particular situation related to COVID. By analyzing data collected from surveys and semi-structured interviews, they have shown that most students see more benefit in the implementation of the hybrid teaching mode than weaknesses for teaching translation courses, despite some technological challenges and limitations. **Nancy Tsai** and **Damien Fan** present a study that address the advantages of online T&I teaching which they sum up as the 4Cs: immediacy, privacy, intimacy, and democracy. The authors argue online classrooms provide Chinese T&I teachers and students a chance to break free from cultural confinements imposed by Confucian values. They introduce the concept of "social presence" into T&I teaching, offering an alternative perspective to understand benefits brought by online teaching that transcends the "face-to-face" versus "online" dichotomy. **Soňa Hodáková** and **Emília Perez**'s contribution provides an empirical study that examines how T&I teachers and students at Slovak universities perceive remote training mode for translators and interpreters in the early and later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. By conducting surveys and semi-structured interviews, they reveal that students' and teachers' perspectives regards remote teaching and training have changed as COVID evolves. Their study sheds light on the strengths and limitations of remote T&I teaching from a diachronic perspective. Similarly, **David B. Sawyer** conducted focus groups with students and instructors at the program of Graduate Studies in Interpreting and Translation (GSIT) in the University of Maryland's Department of Communication to examine their attitudes towards in-person and remote teaching. His study has found that both students and instructors have become more positive about online teaching through their own experience. Interestingly, both groups recommend maintaining an online component to increase flexibility and convenience after the pandemic despite the challenges. In light of the findings, the author also suggests that T&I programs can consider integrating online instruction into the curriculum in a principled way. Also within the field of T&I teaching, **Chen-En Ho** and **Yuan Zou** explores how some challenges in remote interpreter teaching can be mitigated using the proximity-based platform "Gather". They introduced two mock events using online CI and SI teaching followed by a survey to gauge students' perceptions and experience with the platform. Their study found that most participants are positive about the platform which comes with a proximity-sensitive feature that can

largely overcome the limitations of mainstream video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams. In the closing chapter of this section, **Nan Zhao** examines how computer-assisted interpreting (CAI) technologies including remote interpreting (RI), computer-assisted interpreting training (CAIT), pre-task tools, and in-task tools, can be harnessed to aid interpreting in the age of COVID-19. By providing a detailed review of the state-of-the-art and development of CAI technologies, the author also addresses the use of these CAI technologies in real-life scenarios.

1.4 Concluding Remarks

This edited volume, which includes contributions from T&I researchers and scholars around the world, presents an assortment of original studies of social and academic relevance. It focuses on how T&I as a field of study has been affected by and adapted to the disruptions and challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the difficulties, T&I researchers, teachers and students have come up with innovative solutions to cope with the changes imposed by COVID-19. To a certain extent, COVID-19 has served as an unexpected catalyst for T&I institutions, practitioners and researchers to accelerate the adoption of new technologies in their operation and working practices. This edited volume has provided a balanced perspective on the challenges as well as opportunities brought about by COVID-19. By providing first hand accounts of T&I research and practice across different nations in the age of COVID-19, we are able to paint a more complete and clearer picture of the impact the pandemic is having on T&I.

We hope that this edited volume, with contributions from scholars and teachers working in academic institutions and practitioners working at the coalface, will contribute towards a better understanding of the impact and implications of COVID-19 on translation and interpreting studies. We also hope that the articles will stimulate important conversations among T&I scholars and teachers and those who are working in related fields including linguistics, communication and education.

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