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Dörte Andres, *Dolmetscher als literarische Figuren. Von Identitätsverlust, Dilettantismus und Verrat* [Interpreters as Literary Figures. On Identity Loss, Amateurishness and Treason], (Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2008, EUR 70,95). Pp 536. ISBN: 978-3899751178

The topic of this volume is illustrative of a paradigm shift from the interpreter as a collateral figure to the interpreter as a character in the limelight, becoming a central cultural mediator in the late 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. The shift, the author argues, is due to the increasingly problematic experiences of migration, hybrid cultures, belonging and identity, the ‘clash of civilisations’ and – ultimately – the power of language.

As the title of this first chapter suggests (“Das Bild des Dolmetschers in der Geschichte. Eine Spurensuche”), Andres aims at painting a vivid picture of the interpreter in time, in order to take the reader on a scavenger hunt. She begins with Ancient Egypt, followed by the Greek Antiquity, then onward through the Roman Empire, the Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the New Age and, finally, the 20th century. Here, she addresses two points of view: the beneficiary’s and the interpreter’s. Chapter 2, which carries the bulk of the research, again aims to paint a picture, but this time of the interpreter through the lens of a selection of literary texts (“Das Bild des Dolmetschers in literarischen Texten”). Dörte Andres makes a point of picking literary texts only up to 2003 (in translated versions, when necessary), as she argues that, after 2004, literary texts dealing with topics where the interpreter plays a major role have become inflationary. The author starts with Rosanna Guarnieri’s 1967 novel, *Allo? ...ici l’interprète!*, and continues with Ivo Andrić’s *Wesire und Konsuln* (2001), Michael Frayn’s spy novel *The Russian Interpreter* (1966), Brian Friel’s play *Translations* (1980), Agnes Gergely’s *Die Dolmetscherin* (1983), Suki Kim’s *The Interpreter* (2003), Javier Marias’ *Mein Herz so weiss* (1992), Max Davidson’s *The Greek Interpreter* (1990), Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Between* (1968), Ingeborg

Bachmann's *Simultan* (1978), Suzanne Glass' *The Interpreter* (1999) and ends with Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984). In all instances, Dörte Andres uses the same approach for analyzing every item of her corpus: first, she delineates the novel (or the play, in a single case), then relates the content describing the situation and the interpreter, finally moving on to explain the broader context and why the character of the interpreter is pivotal and how the plot is really about him or her. By structuring her approach in this way, Dörte Andres unambiguously shows what an interpreter is and isn't, why conference interpreting can make or break a conversation, how and to what extent an interpreter bridges gaps in communication and builds bridges for cultures to come closer to one another and eventually avoid or solve conflictual situations. Last but not least, Chapter 3 talks in detail about the profession and its underlying deontology. Starting from the characters of literary novels, Dörte Andres deconstructs the essence of the profession, explaining how it came into being not just historically, but evolutionarily. In any given civilization, there have always been people who could speak and understand a particular language. Throughout history, ever since Ancient Egypt, an interpreter was perceived as an ambivalent breed: whether a builder of bridges, a witness of his or her time, a language acrobat with access to the high and mighty of this world or a traitor, parrot or language robot.¹ An interpreter is more or less in the league of a shaman or a medicine man, an authority figure by the simple fact that he or she can understand what mere mortals cannot. The interpreter is especially dubious because – more often than not – s/he speaks with the enemy and knows what they're really saying!

In Chapter 3, Dörte Andres addresses what Pöchhacker calls "erzwungene Immersion" (44), i.e. forced immersion, thus referring to the fact that interpreters were often originally prisoners of war, slaves or part of a conquered people, learning the language of their captor or oppressor to obtain better living conditions. Those early beneficiaries of interpreting services assumed that it was enough to master two languages to become an interpreter. However, they were soon forced to admit that this was only part of the equation; such jobs also needed loyalty and impartiality, with the latter particularly hard to come by. This is how the Italian expression

“*traduttore traditore*” found its way up into the collective mind for centuries, as the interpreter was repeatedly accused of abusing his/her powers, being unreliable, pursuing his or her own interests and, obviously, having a *parti pris*.

Chapter 1 aims to present the history of interpreting as neutrally as possible, merely pointing to eras and instances when an interpreter was used and how the activity was described. Although, in most cases when an interpreter is mentioned, he or she is mentioned because of a misalignment or an error. The act of interpreting is rarely acknowledged as being important: once finished it is forgotten, even more so in recent years, with simultaneous interpreting dominating the market and interpretation being basically available on demand and at the press of a button, often without acknowledgement of the person behind the voice and the knowledge.

The interpreter characters selected in Chapter 2 are usually cut from a more professional cloth – or at least they claim to have a professional background. Delphine, Rosanna Guarnieri’s character, the first Dörte Andres analyzes, is more of a generalist. The novelist did not know much about the profession of the interpreter and so endowed her character with attributes a real-life interpreter does not really possess. Additionally, the author never loses sight of her readers, who can hardly identify with the profession of the interpreter, so her focus shifts between the insights in the profession and the chick-lit style that sells her books. The main character is therefore the *girl* Delphine, not the *interpreter* Delphine. The rest of the corpus is approached based on the kind of interpretation technique used and depicted in the respective novel: consecutive interpretation in Ivo Andrić’s *Wesire und Konsuln*, Michael Frayn’s *The Russian Interpreter*, Brian Friel’s *Translations* and Agnes Gergely’s *Die Dolmetscherin*; legal interpretation in courts of law in Suki Kim’s *The Interpreter*; consecutive and simultaneous in Javier Marias’ *Mein Herz so Weiss*; and lastly, simultaneous interpretation in Max Davidson’s *The Greek Interpreter*, Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Between*, Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Simultan*, Suzanne Glass’ *The Interpreter* and Suzette Harden Elgin’s *Native Tongue*, a science-fiction novel where the interpreter translates between humans and aliens.

Like most of the selected novels, Ivo Andrić's *Wesire und Konsuln* is not really about interpretation or the interpreter – the role is mostly a metaphor for a life on the edges or between the lines. As Dörte Andres puts it, the interpreter is here, “sprachkundig und doch sprachlos” [knowledgeable of languages and yet speechless] (127). Michael Frayn's *The Russian Interpreter* deals with language and its possibilities so that Manning, the interpreter, is only the tool to show what language can do. Manning tries to manipulate language, to rephrase in order to meet his own goals, warping the sense of the ideas given to him in good faith, yet the author stands guard and doesn't let this caricature of an interpreter mess with true communication – which is how the parties can understand each other and communicate *in spite* of the interpreter, instead of *thanks* to him/her. With this character, the author argues that, although language competence *is* powerful, it can never beat the primary communicators' willingness to truly communicate. Brian Friel's play *Translations* talks about the painful loss of speech and identity, as well as the imminence of this loss due to the changes happening in the environment. Owen, the interpreter, is a go-between, a middleman between cultures: his own, the “Irishness”, for which he stands as the communicator, and the foreign one, the “Englishness”, which will eventually inexorably destroy his own. As such, he is caught in the middle; he is the communicator who has lost his topic. A powerful tool, language shapes and molds the interpreter as well, not only the events he conveys, and in the process, he learns that “you don't cross [...] borders casually” (Friel 68). In *Die Dolmetscherin*, Agnes Gergely touches the topic of identity of people and peoples, of ethnic and religious minorities. The interpreter Karola is a Hungarian Jew during the times of chase on the Jews in Hungary in the 1950s. Her job as an interpreter is conjecture: the story unfolds on a personal level and addresses the “otherness” in terms of minority issues, not in terms of professional interpretation. The same idea of minority issues echoes in Suki Kim's *The Interpreter* from the perspective of an Asian immigrant to America. As Kim states at the end of her novel, “The INS attorney spoke the truth on her cell phone earlier. Judge William's ruling is only a formality. Relief was never a possibility. Deportation had begun the minute she stabbed that girl. She should've known better. Immigrants are

not Americans. Permanent residency is never permanent” (274). This is the first novel analyzed by Dörte Andres where the interpreter plays a pivotal role. Not only does she do her job as a court interpreter, but her comments also serve as cultural bridge: “No answer. Suzy pauses as Mrs. Choi clams up. A silent response is the hardest for an interpreter. Sometimes the witness is confused or does not know the answer. [...] But most times the witness is stuck because the answer is too painful” (Kim 269). Javier Marias’ interpreter Juan in *Mein Herz so weiss* plays with fire when embracing the profession, as he has a family secret looming over his head, where the word is omnipotent and therefore must be feared. So he turns the tables and plays with words in his interpreter job, finds out about the secret and therefore unpeels the onion that is communication. Here again, the role of the interpreter and of interpreting is warped, as the taste to the reader is that interpreting is only about babbling after someone else and distorting meanings at will in international summits—which is never the case in real life. Max Davidson’s *The Greek Interpreter* is a pastiche of the interpreting trade and concludes that it is just as useless as the international conferences for which they are used, therefore it can be done by virtually anyone who wants to earn big money fast; all it requires is just a dictionary and a laptop. Christine Brooke-Rose’s novel *Between* is a metaphor for modern man who is constantly on the move, restless yet seeking stability. The act of interpretation becomes the movement, chipping away at the identity of the person doing this, until all that is left are words, i.e. a perceived reality that does not exist as such. By contrast, Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Simultan* deals with “same time-ness”; the interpreters are in different languages at the same time. Nadja, the interpreter, is at the same time strong and sensitive, self-assured and insecure. She helps others understand each other but doesn’t understand herself, nor can she explain herself to others. She is searching for her mother tongue, her home country and her own value as she is caught up in this Neverland of languages and meanings that have to happen at the same time. Ingeborg Bachmann has little concern for accuracy when depicting the interpreting profession, she is more focused on the language, namely on the simultaneous existence of good and bad language and especially on what damage bad, poor language can do in the wrong hands or if left to its

own devices. *The Interpreter* is Suzanne Glass' first novel and talks about identity, language and love. Dominique, the interpreter, is fluent in seven languages, yet she hasn't found her own internal voice. Dominique is an *alter ego* of the author, a conference interpreter herself, who at some point decided to use her linguistic abilities differently, as she explains in an interview with Dan Caxon: "At a certain point after a conference at the EEC, interpreting about the size of tomatoes and the length of cucumbers, I thought I was going to lose my mind. I was really sick of expressing other people's opinions, so I took a year off and went to journalism school." Although written by a proclaimed former professional in conference interpreting, Dörte Andres voices some serious doubts based on the accuracy of the interpreting environment described in her novel. While the novel is rather accurate in depicting the life and especially the dos and don'ts of interpreting, we must not forget that this is a work of fiction, albeit a cathartic one for the author herself. Like her heroine, Glass feels that the profession has depleted her of her own voice and identity, so she must go on a quest to get it back. Finally, Suzette Haden Elgin's science-fiction novel *Native Tongue*, the first novel of a trilogy, is all about language and gender, in the sense that it aims to develop and spread Laadan, a language of women, in a patriarchic world. The novel is not actually about conference interpreting; the profession is just a means to a narrational end. The book is instead about language as a means to change the world.

Dörte Andres also analyzes the interpreter as a metaphor (as seen in most if not all of the novels selected) in conjunction with the trade of interpretation and its relationship with power, i.e. ethos, norms, completeness and accuracy, impartiality, secrecy and oath. She goes on to address translational research and, last but not least, the matter of identity: identity as a concept, identity in the literary depictions, relationships between work environment and personality, cultural, linguistic and interpretational aspects of identity, cultural shock and dealing with it. In this vein, Dörte Andres' book ends with a mirroring of voluntary multilingualism and involuntary multilingualism: what it is, how it all began, how it is today and how the interpreter him/herself sees his/her multilingualism.

Although Dörte Andres postulates that the figure of the conference interpreter has gained traction (even being in inflationary supply in recent years) and gets to be seen as a person, and conference interpreting as a profession, the literary works she chooses rarely if ever meet this postulate. They are false main characters, but mostly metaphors.

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Notes:

¹ „Dolmetscher: Brückenbauer, Zeitzeuge, Sprachakrobat mit Erfolg und Ansehen und Zugang zu den Mächtigen der Welt... – oder Verräter, Papagei, Sprachautomat” (15).

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