

Lost in thought

What mechanisms exist for tracking what goes on in translators' minds while they are at work? Alejandro Bolaños García-Escribano looks for some answers



Alejandro Bolaños García-Escribano is a freelance translator and subtitler based in London. He is also a teaching fellow at University College London (UCL), where he teaches translation at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In his doctoral studies, he examines online learning environments for the teaching of audiovisual translation, focusing on the pedagogical potential offered by cloud-based subtitling tools.

In February, the Centre for Translation Studies at University College London (UCL) hosted a European Commission 'Translating Europe' regional workshop under the title 'Unlocking the black box of translators' eyes and mind'. With an emphasis on the importance of empirical and process-oriented research studies in translation and interpreting studies, the event aimed to shed light on how research can help us to unravel the idiosyncrasies of professional translation.

Studying how our brains operate when we translate has always been an intricate and challenging activity. But nowadays, thanks to advances in digital research methods such as eye tracking and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), we are gaining an ever clearer understanding of what goes on inside the black box.

However, despite the many advances made so far, the first speaker, Maureen Ehrensberger-Dow from the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, called for caution. She began her talk by summing up decades of research on translation and interpreting cognition, and stated, 'The reality is we are [only] getting little glimpses [into translators' cognitive behaviours].'

Shift of focus

She also described a gradual shift of focus in translation process research. Since the last two decades of the 20th century, substantive research has been carried out on how individual translators work, with the help of screen recording, keylogging, interviews, in situ observation, surveys and retrospective verbal reports. But, with the advent of new

technologies, the ways in which researchers approach the study of cognition in translation and interpreting are shifting. Where the focus used to be on decision-making and problem-solving, it has now broadened to include the ecological and social aspects of translation. That means linguists' workplaces have become a proper object of study, and research is being conducted on the ergonomics of translation.

The multidisciplinary nature of translation and interpreting is no longer called into question. Most of the presenters highlighted the

The event aimed to shed light on how research can help us to unravel the idiosyncrasies of professional translation

importance of applying empirical research methods that are often used in other disciplines. Binghan Zheng, from Durham University, thrilled the audience with an impressive set of fMRI images of trainee translators' brains in action. Zheng's work represents the latest advances in neurocognitive translation process research, tapping into the relationship between neuro-functions and cognitive translation/interpreting behaviours.


Along the same lines, Agnieszka Szarkowska from the University of Warsaw, Carlos Teixeira from Dublin City University and Lucas

Nunes Vieira from the University of Bristol discussed the many possible applications of eye-tracking methods – in conjunction with keylogging, screen recording and cued-based retrospective interviews – to the study of subtitling, translation memory (TM) and machine translation (MT). Eye trackers provide researchers with hard data – numerical and visual information about a translator's performance. It is little wonder that they are currently being given so much attention in research.

Bottom-up approach

The event's last speaker tackled the question of how professional translators can use empirical research tools as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). Claire Shih, from University College London, described this as a bottom-up approach to CPD that could help professional translators improve their skills through self-observation and self-evaluation. Furthermore, Shih spoiled the audience by offering a live demonstration of webcam-based eye-tracking software (GazeRecorder). Stephen Turkington – a European Commission language officer in London and co-organiser of the event – kindly volunteered to have his face and eyes tracked in a live demonstration.

The many questions posed by the audience revealed how fascinating empirical research is to the translation community, practitioners and academics alike. Speech recognition, MT and TM systems were some of the topics discussed throughout the event, as were post-editing, amateur translation, subtitling and fansubbing.

The event provided much food for thought and highlighted the very complex nature of translation and interpreting. The many issues raised by the speakers exceeded all my expectations and helped to shed light on a clearly under-researched topic with lots of potential. 

This event was recorded and will be made available on the Translating Europe YouTube channel. Find out more about the European Commission's Translating Europe regional workshops by following the hashtag #TranslatingEurope on Twitter. Thanks to Claire Shih, co-organiser of the event, and Jorge Díaz-Cintas, my PhD supervisor, for their help with this article.