Emerging narratives of conference interpreters' training: a case study of *ad hoc* training in Babels and the Social Forum

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Resumen: Desde una perspectiva narrativa, este artículo explora cómo la práctica y la formación en interpretación de conferencias se han percibido en la disciplina, en la profesión y en diferentes colectivos de traductores e interpretes comprometid@s como ECOS y Babels. Sostiene que estas distintas maneras de percibir la interpretación no son meramente opuestas sino que su potencial confluencia es clave para hacer posible una interpretación de conferencias más comprometida políticamente y más socio-crítica en un mundo de desigualdades cada vez más acentuadas y de mercantilización creciente de todos los aspectos de la vida. El artículo lleva a cabo un estudio de caso sobre la formación *ad hoc* de intérpretes en el Foro Social, en particular el Foro Social Europeo de Londres, y analiza cómo el trabajo colectivo entre instituciones educativas y sociedad civil tanto local como global ha dado luz a prácticas transformadoras hacia una metodología de formación más socio-critica y con mayor consciencia ética.

Palabras Clave: Interpretación de conferencias, Formación, Ética, Mundialización, Babels, Ecos, Narrativas

Abstract: Adopting a narrative perspective, this paper explores the ways in which conference interpreting practice and training have been conceptualised in the discipline and the profession, as well as by different activist communities of translators and interpreters like ECOS and Babels. It argues that these different conceptualisations should not be seen as merely oppositional but that their potential overlap is key in disclosing the possibility of a more politically aware and socially critical practice of conference interpreting in a world of widening inequalities and increased commodification of all aspects of life. The paper examines a case study of interpreters' *ad hoc* training in the Social Forum, particularly the London European Social Forum, and how collaborative work across educational institutions, local and global civil society has allowed for transformative practices towards more socio-critical and ethically aware training methodology.

Key words: Conference Interpreting, Training, Ethics, Globalisation, Babels, Ecos, Narratives

Introduction

In a society increasingly polarised by power imbalances between dominant and resistant voices, training translators and interpreters beyond the professional market is a pressing issue. A number of initial studies of activist communities of translators and interpreters – ECOS (De Manuel, *et al*, 2004; Baker, 2006a; Sánchez Balsalobre, *et al*, in press), Translators for Peace and Tlaxcala (Baker 2006a, in press), and Babels (Baker, 2006a; Boéri, 2008, in progress) – have attempted to set a broad research agenda for exploring the socio-politics and ethics of translation and interpreting. These studies however, have not yet engaged with the innovative and experimental strategies of these communities to ensure quality in a context characterised by poor financial resources, lack of qualified professionals, and resistant discourses. Furthermore, the attention to the public conflict between the profession and Babels (Pöchhacker, 2006; Boéri, 2008) tend to overshadow the overlap and cooperation across these spaces made possible by the location of particular individuals at the cross-roads between them and the subsequent potential for perturbing the statu quo.

In an attempt to explore the ways in which conference interpreting practice and training have been conceptualised in the discipline, the profession, and activist communities of translators and interpreters, this paper draws on the notion of narratives, defined in social and communication theory as everyday stories that allow us to make sense of our lives and that orient our behaviour and judgement. Recently imported into translation studies by the work of Baker (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, in press), narrative theory allows me to explore competing and overlapping perspectives on conference interpreters training and their consequences for a more socially critical and politically aware conference interpreters' training.

After a definition of narratives, this paper explores the competing approaches to knowledge that have shaped the

meaning of conference interpreting in the profession and in research, and underlines the last developments with the influence of a socio-critical pedagogy, particularly with the work of Jesús De Manuel (2002, 2003, 2006). It then contextualises ECOS (Traductores e intérpretes por la solidaridad) [1] and Babels, the international network of volunteer translators and interpreters in the alter-globalisation movement, and provides a case-study of their *ad hoc* training initiative in the run-up to the Social Forum, an initiative that aims to bring together social movements and citizens from across the globe to search and implement alternatives to corporate-led globalisation. Emerging out of the cooperation between three groups – the Teaching Innovation Project of the University of Granada «Elaboración de material didáctico multimedia para las clases de interpretación» (*Marius*), [2] a local activist association (ECOS) and an international one (Babels), this initiative reflects the extent to which spaces with a priori different interests and competing narratives of knowledge, of the world and of conference interpreting, can be brought together and initiate transformative training practices towards greater social awareness of the role of conference interpreting in our asymmetrical society.

The narrative turn

Narratives are defined in the social sciences as stories that we believe in and that shape our sense of self and the world in which we live. In this context, narrative is no longer understood as a genre as opposed, say, to argumentation, but is assumed to cut across texts and pervade all forms of communication. Social and Communication Theorists Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson argue that 'narrative reframing' (1994: 38) or 'reframing narrativity' (1994: 58) entails that 'scholars […] are postulating something much more substantive about narrative: namely, that social life is itself storied and that narrative is an ontological condition of social life' (1994: 38). Narratives are ontological and epistemological in the sense that they constitute the prisms through which we construct our identity and make sense of our life: 'These concepts [epistemology and ontology] posit that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities' (Somers, 1994: 606). In other words, knowledge, life and self are all storied: 'everything we know from making families, to coping with illness, to carrying out strikes and revolutions is at least in part a result of numerous cross-cutting story-lines in which social actors locate themselves' (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 41). As pointed out by psychology scholar Jerome Bruner

(1991), a narrative approach seeks to account for the interpretive process of meaning negotiation at play in the human mind's attempt to make sense of the world, and in so doing *construct* reality, [3] as opposed to the rational tradition, which approaches knowledge in terms of logical reasoning, and the empirical tradition, which approaches it in terms of verifiability.

A narrative approach to meaning and knowledge is thus particularly relevant for exploring the cross-cutting stories that not only inform our perception of conference interpreting but also shape conference interpreters training research and its practice on the ground. Furthermore, since a narrative approach assumes that people are inescapably embedded in a variety of narratives, there is no possibility of an objective stance. This entails that the analysis provided in this study is inevitably conducted from my own narrative location at the intersection between a variety of spaces – the alter-globalisation movement, Babels and ECOS, conference interpreting academia and profession, among others.

Typology of narratives

In an attempt to understand the discourse and practice of conference interpreters' training across these spaces, I draw on the notions of personal, public, conceptual, and meta-narratives which function as interdependent prisms that mediate our experience of the world and our sense of identity.

Personal narratives are narratives of the self. Although they are stories we believe about ourselves, they do not function in isolation of the societies in which they are embedded. Indeed, all types of shared narratives (public, conceptual, professional and meta-narratives), shape and constrain personal narratives, and vice versa.

Public narratives are stories that are elaborated by and circulated among formations larger than the individual (Baker, 2006b: 33); individuals agree with or dissent from such narratives according to whether they resonate with their life, identity and experience as individuals or as members of a group (Whitebrook, 2001: 145).

Public narratives become *meta-narratives* when they achieve a certain temporal and physical breadth, a sense of inevitability and inescapability, of applicability to various events (Baker, 2006b: 45) and appeal to values such as evil, danger or goodness, which allow for a strong psychological identification with the narrative (Alexander, 2002: 27).

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[1] Translators and interpreters for solidarity.

[2] Elaboration of multimedia didactic material for interpreting classes.

[3] Although Bruner's definition of narratives as constructed knowledge would seem to overlap with the Foucaultian notion of discourse, defined as 'socially constructed knowledges of some aspect of reality' (Van Leeuwen, 2005: 94), the notion of narrative differs from that of discourse (see Boéri, 2008).

Meta-narratives are the narratives 'in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history' (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 61); examples include Progress, Decadence, Industrialisation and Enlightenment (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 61), «Capitalism vs. Communism, the Individual vs. Society, Barbarism/ Nature vs. Civility» (Somers, 1992: 605), the 'Cold War' and 'War on Terror' (Baker, 2006b), Islam (Al-Herthani, 2009; Ayoub, in progress; Hijazi, 2009). Meta-narratives are built on homogenising and streamlining a complex reality into broad abstractions (Somers, 1994; Somers and Gibson, 1994).

Particularly important in lending legitimacy to public, as well as meta-narratives, *conceptual narratives* are defined as concepts that constitute the history of knowledge in the human sciences. Conceptual narratives shape the way in which societal processes are understood and explained. They form the social space where 'competing ontologies of identity, political life, society and so on, gain currency and shape the empirical problems … encounter[ed by] … sociologists' (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 44).

These types of narrative are circulated by a wide spectrum of social and political institutions and practices (Somers, 1994: 625). They are not fixed analytical categories but are deeply inter-dependent and inter-connected as they dynamically evolve in relation to each other as we shall see in the analysis of competing narratives of conference interpreting, knowledge, and society.

A narrative account of conference interpreting: conceptual narratives

De Manuel's review (in press) of the paradigms of conference interpreting studies identifies three paradigms that have been influential in conference interpreting studies: (a) the *hermeneutic paradigm* whereby practitioners theorise their own practice so as to generate practical knowledge to be applied to training; (b) the *positivist paradigm* whereby experts elaborate technical and uniquely legitimate knowledge to be universalised and imposed on society at large; (c) the *socio-critical paradigm* whereby subjects beyond discrete roles of researcher, trainer, trainee, practitioner generate transformative and emancipative knowledge that allows them to resolve a social problem they are confronted to. De Manuel's paradigms overlap with Somers' and Gibson's definition of conceptual narratives as the theories, knowledge and presuppositions of social sciences. But to explore the ways in which these conceptual narratives encode the stories we elaborate about our «object» of study and about the world at large, Somers' and Gibson's notion of conceptual narratives need to be broadened to encompass two subsets of narratives: *disciplinary narratives*, i.e. the stories elaborated by scholars across disciplines (Baker, 2006b: 39), and *professional narratives*, i.e. stories that professionals elabo-

rate for themselves and others about the nature and ethos of their activity (Boéri, 2008: 26). In what follows, I examine the extent to which conceptual, disciplinary and professional narratives of conference interpreting have dynamically overlapped and differed.

The hermeneutic conceptual narrative was particularly influential in the 70s with the involvement of the nascent profession in setting up training institutions and programmes (Pöchhacker, 2004; De Manuel, in press). A case in point is the creation and management of ESIT school of interpreting (University of La Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris) by the very founders of AIIC and whose influential training research, based on practitioners' theorising of their own interpreting practice was known as the Paris School (*École du sens* in French). Although its research orientation towards redressing the primarily autodidact profile of professional interpreters at the time contested the professional narrative that «interpreters are born not made», training was to be provided to already highly qualified trainees, a disciplinary narrative that overlapped with a professional narrative of conference interpreting as the preserve of a gifted elite (Boéri, 2008; De Manuel, in press). As we shall see in the analysis, this narrative will be particularly influential in shaping Babels' own approach to conference interpreters' training.

By contrast, the 80s spark the dissociation between conference interpreting professional and disciplinary narratives. On the one hand, the profession was still very much influenced by an hermeneutic conceptual narrative as evidenced in AIIC's activities: publication of papers in the electronic journal *Communicate!*, in the printed journal *interpreting* (Kurtz and Bowen, 1999) and in the setting up of AIIC Training Committee in 2006. On the other hand, the discipline was shaped by a positivist conceptual narrative (De Manuel, in press), as evidenced in the work of Daniel Gile, Barbara Moser Mercer and David Gerver who shifted from the intuitive research methods of the Paris School, and adopted empirical methods of neurosciences and cognitive psychology to understand the process of interpreting whose eventual results would be universalised and imposed on professionals working on the ground. Although the divide between the knowledge generated by the profession (intuitive) and researchers (scientific) is quite clear, the very fact that the experts strived to elicit the mystery of the black box supported the narrative of conference interpreting as requiring mysterious, somehow inaccessible, skills, and in need of protection from threats of unskilled intruders – a narrative that still prevails at the elite end of the profession (see Boéri, 2008).

The picture provided above is inevitably partial as it paints the dominant trends of the narratives of the conference interpreting field, those that prevail at its centre or its core. In what follows, and particularly in the case-study on *ad hoc* training in Babels and the Social Forum, I attempt to demonstrate the extent to which narratives and the fields, institu-

tions and communities that construct and circulate them are negotiated and inclined to change as individuals' and/or communities' located at the margins neat networks of solidarity with other communities.

The growing concern with issues of ideology, power, agency, which coincided with the growth of interest in public service interpreting throughout the 90s, shaped a disciplinary narrative of translation as a purposeful communicative activity, thus orienting conference interpreting research towards an understanding of the politico-institutional context in which conference interpreters are required to work – Pöchhacker's (1995: 35) typology of hypertexts being a case in point. This distanced research from the elitist professional narrative primarily concerned by deontological issues (i.e. working conditions, fees, protection of the market). However, conference interpreters' training does not seem to have benefited from this development which lacked engagement with its applicability to training (De Manuel, 2002).

It is not until the beginning of the 21st century that training was to occupy centre stage in conference interpreting research under the influence of the socio-critical conceptual narrative. Grounded in Jürgen Habermas' theory of communication competence (De Manuel, in press), this conceptual narrative horizontalises and democratises the space so as to involve individuals beyond discrete role of researcher, trainer, trainee, and practitioner in the generation of knowledge geared towards transforming a problematic social situation. Influential in the field of education, the socio-critical conceptual narrative has shaped an educational disciplinary narrative of action-research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Cohen and Manion, 89/07) which has made its way into interpreting studies in recent years (De Terra and Sawyer, 1998; De Manuel, 2002, 2006; García Beyaert, this issue). Action-research reinforces the relationship between training and research by subjecting the objectives and methods of the teacher-researcher, i.e. the diagnosis and the therapy in Cohen and Manion's terms – to the feedback of trainees. In this context, the knowledge generated is situational, in the sense that it is subjective and cannot be extrapolated and replicated without adaptation, and is self-evaluative (De Manuel, 2002) in the sense that trainees are exhorted to become reflexive professionals (Schön, 1990).

De Manuel's teaching innovation project «Elaboración de material didáctico multimedia para las clases de interpretación», [4] that seeks to video record discourses from across real oral communication contexts for their use in the classroom and to redress the problematic use of simulated or read discourses in conference interpreters' training, expli-

citly subscribes to the socio-critical and action-research educationalist narratives: it selects and classifies the degree of difficulty of the material and relevance according to pre-established criteria, to be then contrasted with the subjectivities of teachers and trainees of the conference interpreting courses of the University of Granada; it seeks to enhance reflexivity of conference interpreting trainees on the learning process and on the ethics of the profession they want to exercise (De Manuel 2002, 2003, 2006). The inclusion of material from civil society so as to broaden the range of ideologies, accents, cultures and world views in which the interpreter is commonly socialised, would not only transform interpreters' training within but also beyond the classrooms of the University with wide implications on the narratives that circulate about conference interpreting, as we shall see in the case-study of this paper.

Therefore, understanding, however imperfectly, and transforming the world are no longer the preserve of experts in the socio-critical conceptual narrative but are generated from across contexts. Somers and Gibson's very definition of conceptual narratives as the preserve of sociologists (within scholarly contexts) thus, requires broadening the concept to any actor's theorising of his/her social action so as to encompass not only knowledge generated from across disciplines but also grassroots knowledge. These approaches to knowledge are particularly important in conforming with or challenging the global world order. This leads me to investigate the conceptual narratives that underpin competing meta- and public narratives of globalisation and their impact on *ad hoc* conference interpreters' training in the context of the alter-globalisation movement.

A narrative account of globalisation: meta-, public and conceptual narratives

Although there are as many meanings of globalisation as there are human minds, I examine in this section two competing narratives of globalisation that have particular relevance in this study: neoliberal versus alter-globalisation.

Neoliberal globalisation narrates the world as inevitably global, as a single space in which governments and international institutions must strive for democracy, in the Western liberal sense of ensuring human and social development through the liberalisation and deregulation of economy and, if need be, through military interventions. Sustained by the most powerful structures in modern society, including multinationals, international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), mainstream media, First World States as well as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and even very powerful civil society groups, neoliberal globalisation may be considered as a meta-narrative. The disciplinary narrative of 'the end of history', elaborated by a philosopher and political economist, Francis

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[4] Elaboration of multimedia didactic material for interpreting classes.

Fukuyama from Harvard University played a crucial role in turning the public narrative of liberal democracy into a meta-narrative of neoliberalism:

> What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such… That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukuyama, 1992: 3)

Theorising the collapse of the USSR as the end of ideological conflicts between East and West and as ushering in the advent of Western liberal democracy marks the beginning of a new era that contemporary actors in history can hardly escape from: the universalisation of liberalism across the world, i.e. *neo*liberal globalisation. Here it is particularly interesting that Fukuyama positions himself as an expert who holds the truth about the world.

Whether the narrative of alter-globalisation (rather than neoliberalism) can be treated as a meta-narrative, however, is less clear.[5] Depicting neoliberalism as a major threat to the world, as a danger of commodifying all aspects of life, the alter-globalisation narrative calls for placing social and environmental concerns over economic and financial considerations, thus resorting to some of the mechanisms of construction typical of a meta-narrative: it is storied as widely applicable across different times and contexts; and it streamlines a complex reality into an abstract construct of the current world order as unjust and in need of change.

But alter-globalisation may not qualify as a meta-narrative because (a) it is far from being supported by the most powerful institutions of society, and (b) it downplays one of the key mechanisms of meta-narrative, i.e. predicting social change. This is evidenced in article 11 of the World Social Forum Charter of Principles:[6]

> As a forum for debate, the World Social Forum is a movement of ideas that prompts reflection, and the transparent circulation of the results of that reflection, on the mechanisms and instruments of domination by capital, on means and actions to resist and overcome that domination, and on the alternatives proposed to solve the problems of exclusion and social inequality that the process of capitalist globalization with its racist, sexist and environmentally destructive dimensions is creating inter-

nationally and within countries. (Article 11, World Social Forum Charter, 2001)

This excerpt does identify the danger that capitalist globalisation poses for nature and people quite clearly, but its main focus remains the means through which this danger can be overcome rather than the ends, thus opting for an indeterminacy that discloses a multiplicity of unforeseeable possibilities of social change. This unpredictable stance on the outcome of the alter-globalisation narrative disqualifies it as a meta-narrative:

> There is no metanarrative about social change, no claim to predictive knowledge. […] actors [from the Alter-Globalisation movement] do not only reject forms of unitary knowledge because they feel it cannot be accurate, but also because they deem it oppressive. Following the principle of 'ignorance is useful' to its logical conclusion leads to an ironic twist in the case of human behaviour as it would imply that social actors should not attempt to understand the functioning of their own social system, or that they should at least not presume to do so correctly. This idea, even though its accuracy cannot be confirmed or denied, is reassuring for a movement that resists the oppression of meta-narratives that claim to know what is and what will be at the expense of past, present and potential subjectivities. (Maeckelbergh, 2007: 148)

The alter-globalisation narrative is not inevitable and inescapable in the oppressive sense of imposing expert knowledge onto 'past, present and potential subjectivities' and turning resistance into a vanguard counter-hegemonic struggle that would ultimately reproduce dominance, opting instead to encompass these subjectivities in a reflexive process of social change. If the border between social theory and social action is particularly reinforced in the meta-narrative of neoliberal globalisation, it is resoundingly challenged in the public narrative of alter-globalisation which constructs and is constructed by a socio-critic conceptual narrative: it rejects a pyramidal access to knowledge from ignorance to expertise, and lays down the conditions for liberating subjective and grassroots knowledge. In this sense, it is revealing that Paolo Freire's socio-critical pedagogy and Jürgen Habermas' deliberative democracy are often drawn on to explain the principles of horizontality and participative democracy in the alter-globalisation movement and the politics of organisation of the Social Forum and the transcultural literacy and citizenship that can potentially emerge from them.[7]

Thus, neoliberal globalisation and alter-globalisation narratives differ in terms of their degree of dominance and in terms of the conceptual narratives that underpin them. As we shall

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[5] It is acknowledged here that the very process of choosing to label a given narrative as meta-narrative or public narrative (for instance) is itself part of the narrative being constructed by the narrator, in this case the analyst, and reflects his or her narrative location.

[6] Although the alter-globalisation movement and the Social Forum initiative do not fully overlap (see Nunes 2005 for a contrastive study), its Charter of Principles, written in January 2001, was recognised as a powerful text which echoed the political and organisational principles that shaped the convergent process of the 90s (Böhm 2005, Caruso 2005, Juris 2005, Sullivan 2005, Maeckelbergh 2007, among others).

[7] See Andreotti; Biccum; Tormey; Wright; Glasius; Ylä-Anttila; in Bohm, *et al*, 2005.

see in the next section, this distinctive stance on knowledge has an impact on the ways in which conference interpreting is narrated in the alter-globalisation movement and the possibilities it discloses or forecloses in terms of training *ad hoc* interpreters in the Social Forum.

Ad hoc training in the Social Forum: at the crossroads between Babels, ECOS and the Marius Teaching Innovation Project

Translation and interpreting have certainly played a crucial role in the alter-globalisation movement, the umbrella term for the coming together of social movements and actors from across countries, regions, struggles and identities throughout the 90s that resoundingly disrupted the meta-narrative of neoliberal globalisation. The emergence of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in 2001, an initiative aimed at proposing and implementing alternatives to corporate-led globalisation, opened a space for social movements and actors to network across borders. Interpreting was to feature prominently in this unprecedented culturally and linguistically diverse communication event, particularly with the emergence of Babels. Babels' narrative emerged in explicit alignment with the alter-globalisation public narrative and depicts the group as a political actor of the Social Forum (Boéri, 2008), without any engagement, at the time, with issues of quality, nor working conditions. This is evidenced in the loose requirements to join the network of adhering to the *Babels Charter* (Babels, 2004a) and of fluency in one or more foreign languages as indicated in its registration form (Babels, 2004c). This had the effect of disconnecting the Babels narrative from professional narratives of conference interpreting. Interestingly however, dissident voices in the network, and many professionals among them, raised quality issues and influenced the evolvement of Babels public narrative in the following years.

The tension between quality of interpreting and the political principles of participation and horizontality, or the dichotomy between activist versus professional interpreter feature prominently in the Babels online forum opened after the 2nd European Social Forum held in Paris in 2003 for collective and public discussion among members (Babels, 2004b). In view of the 3rd European Social Forum scheduled in October 2004 in London and of the 5th World Social Forum in January 2005 in Porto Alegre, a Babels international meeting was organised in Brussels with a specific workshop on selection, preparation and quality of interpreting in the Social Forum. This is where the idea of providing a specific training to Babels members before their enlistment for a given Social Forum emerged. It is the term «situational-preparation» that was chosen rather than training because «the word training is taboo, but not for all team members», as reported in the minutes (Babels, 2004e). While some members endeavo-

ured to respond to the communication needs of the Social Forum with the means at Babels disposal, i.e. by training non-qualified volunteers, others feared retaliations from the professional world over training hundreds of interpreters that would then invade the market and downgrade professional standards of a highly protected profession. [8] In this sense, «situational-preparation» (sit-prep) signalled *ad hoc* training and avoided the potential clash of Babels public narrative with the professional narrative of conference interpreters' training and exercise as the preserve of a gifted and/or highly qualified elite.

The involvement of ECOS in Brussels workshop was to prove instrumental in shaping the sit-prep project given its narrative of conference interpreting as both qualified and politically engaged (De Manuel, *et al*, 2004, Sánchez Balsalobre, *et al*, in press). Aligned with the alter-globalisation narrative, ECOS is an association of volunteer translators and interpreters based in the School of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Granada, and composed of lecturers, trainees, recently qualified and experienced professionals who work voluntarily in local civil society initiatives. ECOS thus, finds itself at the cross-roads between a variety of spaces which gave ideal conditions to launch a collaborative project with Babels and the Teaching Innovation Project of the University of Granada, called *Marius* and referred to earlier. It used the video material of the 3rd World Social Forum (Porto Alegre, January 2005) that was stored in *Marius* database and contributed to this database with its own video recordings from the 2nd European Social Forum in Paris (November 2003). Applying *Marius* methodology to the specific purposes of the sit-prep, ECOS then transcribed the material and organised it by languages [9], and by order of difficulty according to the criteria of the researchers working in *Marius* that had been contrasted with the criteria of the conference interpreting trainees of the University of Granada. Thus, the sit-prep material, collected in two didactic DVDs, benefited from the situational knowledge gained by *Marius*. At the same time, instead of being streamlined in universal rules to be extrapolated to any training context, the methodology was adapted to the specific purpose of *ad hoc* training in Babels, as I explore below.

The *Marius* and the ECOS narratives overlapped as regards the need to train or prepare conference interpreters in discourses and communication situations that go beyond the labour market and the interests of the 1st world. This is evidenced in the didactic-technical guide drafted by ECOS for Babels' sit-prep:

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[8] Personal interview with Naima Boutedlja, participant in the workshop.

[9] The material was in French, Spanish and English (the three languages covered at the time by the University of Granada) as well as Portuguese.

The idea is to allow Babels volunteers to have material to test their technical skills (for those without specific interpreting training) and their background knowledge (for those who did receive interpreting training but are unfamiliar with the issues or usual approaches of the social forums, very different from those of the «unique thinking» bombarded by mass media and educational institutions). (ECOS and Babels, 2005, my translation from Spanish)

The sit-prep is depicted as a material to overcome two potential identities of Babels members as qualified versus politically aware interpreters and as enhancing cross-fertilisation of technical and political knowledge of conference interpreting. Its selected training material, i.e. Social Forum discourses, is depicted as departing from that of mainstream media or educational institutions and the «unique thinking» they socialise and train citizens/interpreters into. The strong critique of the educational institutions as circulating and thus, as helping to construct the meta-narrative of neoliberalism, overlaps with *Marius'* attempt to go beyond the training of professional for the market and to educate citizens. The sit-prep is thus positioned in line with the alter-globalisation narrative of disrupting the neoliberal consensus, or the assumption that there is no alternative to the world in which we live. The *Marius* narrative of combining technical and political knowledge to train reflexive interpreters as reflexive professionals intersects with Babels' narrative of providing *ad hoc* training to non-qualified interpreters. ECOS' narrative of both qualified and politically aware interpreters constitutes a point of intersection between *Marius'* and Babels' narrative of training as evidenced in the very rationale of the sit-prep:

We know that working with more than 20 hours of video recordings collected in these two DVDs [...] and with their corresponding transcriptions do not substitute a regulated training in interpreting nor a long activist experience. However, we do hope that they will constitute a useful material to get started in these two aspects, as we are well aware that the profile of the volunteer professional interpreter with a long Experience of activism is too scarce to cover Babels' needs and that, after all, anything can be learnt: to be a critical and solidary citizen and to interpret in a simultaneous booth. If the institutionalised training has failed to sufficiently cover these two facets, someone will have to start doing it. (ECOS and Babels, 2005, my translation from Spanish)

By downplaying the sit-prep as just a starting point, ECOS here aligns the situational-preparation with the narrative that gave it birth in Brussels and forecloses the use of the material as an easy shortcut to the professional market. Furthermore, it discards the sit-prep being a ready-made package for turning politically unaware into aware interpreters. The conceptual narrative of complexity and grassroots knowledge seen as underpinning the alter-globalisation narrative, is particularly at play here by depicting knowledge as both accessible to anyone and partial: a qualified interpreter can learn about poorly serviced narratives in the professional market or the educational institutions and a non qualified in-

terpreter can discover his/her potential for conference interpreting. Depicting the sit-prep as a response to social needs uncovered by training institutions reflects the influence of *Marius'* socio-critical conceptual narrative of transformative education.

Besides, knowledge sharing in the sit-prep is not only about emancipation from power hierarchies of who knows and who does not, but also from the commodification of knowledge by patenting and copyright regulations. A case in point is the fact that the didactic DVDs are copyleft and that the use of Microsoft products, however inevitable in the early days of the initiative, given the urgency of releasing the material in time for the London European Social Forum, is explicitly stated as wrong in the didactic and technical guide (see ECOS and Babels, 2005). This suggests that the sit-prep is not only a tool, i.e. a DVD to respond to a social need, but more importantly a method of transforming the ways in which we relate to each other in a learning and knowledge production environment that is ultimately liberating. [10]

The influence of socio-critical pedagogy is further evidenced in the sit-prep didactic methodology that is based on self-assessment and is situational – in the sense that the methodology is not to be replicated across the Social Forums covered by Babels but adapted to their specific circumstances, needs and subjectivities. Similarly, in Babels, the knowledge gained from the organisation of a given Social Forum, although documented to allow for collective learning, is not to be imposed on subsequent projects. This is established in the *Babels Protocols* (Babels 2005) where Babels organisation is depicted as decentralised into relatively autonomous projects. Thus, the Babels narrative is also informed by a conceptual narrative of situated, subjective and reflexive knowledge. I now turn to the use of the sit-prep methodology in the particular project of the London European Social Forum.

Ad hoc training in the London European Social Forum Babels project

In London European Social Forum, the first Babels project where the sit-prep was ever implemented Babels was given access to a computer lab which allowed running collective sit-preps on a daily basis. The methodology of the didactic and technical guide, primarily oriented to Babels members domestic use, was thus slightly adapted for the office collective sit-preps and involved the following: a short presentation of Babels and the Social Forum, introduction of partici-

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[10]   See Brailowsky and Brander, forthcoming, for a discussion on the potential overlap between socio-critical pedagogy and hacker ethics.

pants to each others, short conceptual introduction to simultaneous interpretation, presentation of the facilities, sit-prep demo to be followed by participants' simultaneous interpreting under the supervision of two members of the sit-prep team and followed by the self-assessment of their performance, a feedback session (Babels 2004d). As reported by the team, this pilot phase allowed to take into account the point of view of the participants which «confirmed that it was the interpreters themselves who were best placed to assess their own competency to perform simultaneous interpretation» (Babels 2004d), and to troubleshoot some technical as well as organisational issues:

> Among the participants convened to a sit-prep, a very small percentage of people was able to perform simultaneous interpretation. The sit-prep appeared to be very time consuming as it took a lot of hours to set up a sit-prep to select only a couple of participants for the ESF. We therefore decided to organise the SitPrep on a more individualised basis by inviting potential interpreters to come to the Babels office at a time that suited them. This proved far more efficient: people could turn up at virtually any time (the office was open all day, 8am till late from Monday to Friday and sometimes weekends) and were given guidelines on how to perform simultaneous interpretation and how to use the system (DVD, audio files, etc) and then left to practice and fill in a self-assessment form when they had finished. (Babels 2004e)

Although the pilot session itself implemented the principle of learners' autonomy of the *Marius* and ECOS didactic and technical guide by entrusting sit-prep participants to self-assess their performance, this autonomy was further implemented by adapting the sit-prep to each participant's circumstances; a defining characteristic of action-research methodology (Nixon 1981, in De Manuel 2002) to which *Marius*, ECOS and the London Babels sit-prep team appear to subscribe. Sit-prep sessions in the Babels' office became individual rather than collective and run by the individual him/herself rather than by the sit-prep team. The latter, however, did not disappear completely, a usual misperception of action-research educationalist narrative. Indeed, two volunteers from the sit-prep team still assisted participants before and after the session in a horizontal relationship of democratically deliberating over the process and outcome of the session. This practice is at the intersection between Babels' narrative as a network subscribed to the alter-globalisation narrative and its principles of horizontality and democracy as well as *Marius'* Habermasian socio-critical narrative.

Beyond the London European Social Forum

Although the *Babels Protocols* specify that Babels projects are granted autonomy, they also require projects' teams to document their experience so as to share the knowledge acquired. For example, the London ESF sit-prep team emphasised the fact that the flexible approach of individualised

and autonomous sitprep sessions is recalled as converting the Babels office into a space propitious to networking away from the Babels virtual space of email lists, electronic forum, and as enhancing volunteers' mobilisation in the London European Social Forum organisational process, be they potential volunteer interpreters for the Social Forum or not. This unexpected mobilising effect of the sit-prep was reported as an important aspect to be incorporated in the objectives of the initiative as a whole (Babels 2004e). This suggests a balance between autonomous situational projects and relevance of their outcome beyond their specific context. This balance is precisely what De Manuel sees as countering the positivist misperception of action-research methodology whose knowledge production is context-bounded (De Manuel, in press).

Since London, the sit-prep has been implemented and adapted across Babels projects in the run-up to Porto Alegre and Bamako World Social Forums, as well as Athens European Social Forum, although their experience has not systematically been reported with the consequence of hindering knowledge sharing and collective learning between projects, a principle established in the *Babels Protocols*. The international Babels meeting in Paris in June 2006 where these experiences could be shared in a workshop on training, quality and selection proved essential for the different *ad hoc* training teams to have a broader picture of what had been done until then across the network and launched a collaborative project of feeding the DVD with a broader scope of languages than the ones available at the time and of confirming the need to emancipate Babels *ad hoc* training from brevetted software; a narrative of free knowledge that, as demonstrated in the case-study, can be traced back in the early days of the sit-prep, and in *Marius'* long-term objectives.

Concluding remarks

Narratives are not mere abstractions of reality but have real consequences on the ground. We have seen how conceptual narratives have the power to shape the ways in which we approach knowledge and thus the way in which we construct the conference interpreting field and position it in relation to society at large. While the hermeneutic and positivist conceptual narratives contributed to conceptualising conference interpreting as the preserve of an elite and as a gift, to restricting training access to a privileged minority and to gearing training towards the needs of the professional market, the emergence of a socio-critical educationalist narrative sparked a volte-face in training research methodology and re-conceptualised conference interpreters' training as education of reflexive and citizen professionals.

But these narratives do not enjoy the same degree of dominance. The socio-critical narrative which requires engaging with issues of ethics and socio-political awareness in

training may be marginal in most training institutions where a cost-effective and expert-oriented view of education tends to prevail. Interestingly, these power imbalances can be reverted in spaces that resist the meta-narrative of corporate-led globalisation: in the context of Babels, the socio-critical educationalist narrative became particularly influential whereas professional narratives of conference interpreting as the preserve of an elite were relegated to the margins. But the latter still had the strength to pressure Babels to engage with the issue of quality and then to prevent Babels' training initiative from interfering with conference interpreters' training institutions. This influence, however, has been loosing strength in the last few years as the word «training» per se has been increasingly used in Babels. This suggests that when a social need is not covered, or not sufficiently, by a profession and/or by training institutions, i.e. when there are not enough volunteer professional and/or qualified interpreters to respond to the Social Forums' unconventional communication needs, ethical values take precedence over economic interests and individuals set out to fill the gap through networks of solidarity among a variety of communities and across the local and the global. ECOS' position at the cross-roads of a variety of spaces like the alter-globalisation movement was ideal in reconciling narratives of professionalism and political engagement that were in tension in Babels at the time.

Ad hoc training in Babels, should not be seen, however, as a solution for any of the unconventional interpreting needs that might emerge in civil society as it is the role of public institutions to broaden the curriculum to languages and discourses that are required by society at large and beyond the prescriptive bonds of the market and of the first world. The *ad hoc* training transformative practice that emerges out of the narrative overlap [11] between *Marius*, ECOS and Babels, rather than substituting public training institutions, discloses possibilities of social change in them. But given the historical influence of the profession on conference interpreting training institutions' policy of accessibility, curriculum and examination, change must also be initiated in the conference interpreting profession. Dominant professional narratives of conference interpreting are currently challenged by the emergence of activist communities of translators and interpreters like Babels, and by a socio-critical approach to training. These developments have not gone without public

controversy as evidenced in a series of debates in AIIC revolving around the legitimacy of the activist profile of conference interpreting in Babels (see Boéri 2008), and in Babels revolving around the legitimacy of AIIC in presiding over trainees' and practitioners' access to the profession and for claiming to represent the profession as a whole while protecting the interest of a highly privilege minority (see Babels 2006). Although these debates suggest limited possibilities of change and conflict rather than solidarity, the presence of many professionals in Babels and of Babels members in the profession should not be overshadowed.

One relevant characteristic of a narrative approach in this regard is that it focuses on institutional positionings and the ways in which they are shaped by individuals' positions without fully encompassing them. Adopting a narrative approach circumvents the temptation to conflate actors in static categories of activist versus professional, volunteer versus remunerated, trainers versus trainees, etc. supposedly determined by their engagement or non-engagement in specific spaces and instead, accounts for both the convergence of actors in a given community or space on the basis of their subscription to shared stories and at the same time, for the variation of narratives across individuals. This is what I undertake to examine in a larger project on Babels' narrative construction in time and space of its scope of involvement, financial and decision-making structures out of a negotiation among individuals at the centre, the margins or outside Babels (see Boéri, in progress). The narrative model developed in this project and only briefly presented here given the limited scope of this paper, is a powerful tool for a sociology and an ethics of the field because it allows for capturing social change on the ground where practice is transformed and dominant narratives are challenged, as I hope I have evidenced in this case-study of *ad hoc* training in the run-up to the Social Forum.

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[11] This is not to say that there is full overlap: in order to train interpreters for the professional market, *Marius* also selects and uses material from dominant narratives in the classroom; ECOS organises its own activities beyond translation and interpreting (Sánchez Balsalobre, *et al*, in press); Babels' work and activities go far beyond *ad hoc* training and involves participating in the politics of organisation of the Social Forum (Boéri and Hodkinson 2004); the alter-globalisation movement's stance on grassroots knowledge is not the unanimity as top-down form of knowledge transmission can be used by less contemporary political groups that take part.

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