

# SOCIAL DISTANCE AND THE ROLE OF THE DIALOGUE INTERPRETER

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## ABSTRACT

Professionals and researchers have debated the issue of the role of the dialogue interpreter for decades. Role negotiation has been tied to the degree of mediation carried out by the interpreter in the communicative act. Pragmatics still has a lot of untapped potential as an approach to explore factors that contribute to this mediation. The present paper aims at investigating the interplay between mediation, role, and the pragmatic notion of social distance in dialogue interpreting. Firstly, the relevant literature on social distance is reviewed in order to define the concept; secondly, its applicability to dialogue interpreting is analysed, along with its complex and singular dynamics in triadic exchanges; finally, the last section addresses the implications of social distance for mediation and, thus, for the interpreter's role negotiation.

**KEYWORDS:** dialogue interpreting, mediation, interpreter's role, social distance.

## RESUMEN

El debate sobre el rol del intérprete dialógico lleva décadas ocupando a profesionales e investigadores. La negociación del rol se ha vinculado al grado de mediación que lleva a cabo el intérprete en el acto comunicativo. La pragmática tiene aún mucho potencial inexplorado como enfoque para abordar el estudio de los factores que contribuyen a esta mediación. El presente artículo tiene por objeto examinar la interacción entre la mediación, el rol y la concepción pragmática de la distancia social. En primer lugar, se recoge la bibliografía pertinente sobre distancia social con vistas a definir el concepto; a continuación, se analiza su aplicabilidad a la interpretación dialógica, así como su comportamiento complejo y particular en la comunicación triádica; finalmente, en el último apartado, se dilucidan las implicaciones de la distancia social para la mediación y, por consiguiente, para la negociación del rol del intérprete.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** interpretación dialógica, mediación, rol del intérprete, distancia social.



## 1. A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON ROLE NEGOTIATION IN DIALOGUE INTERPRETING

The controversy regarding the definition of the boundaries for the dialogue interpreter's role has been studied by many authors over the years (e.g. Angelelli; Bot; Fenton; Fowler; Inghilleri; Roberts; Anderson, "Perspectives on the Role of the Interpreter" and "Interpreter Roles and Interpretation Studies"; Pöchhacker, "Interpreting as Mediation"; Wadensjö, "The Double Role of a Dialogue Interpreter"). This issue is relevant because of its implications for the ethical principles of impartiality and fidelity.

All participants in any interpreter-mediated interaction have a concept, whether conscious or unconscious, of what the role of the professional should be (Fowler 195-196; Wadensjö, *Interpreting as Interaction* 150; Inghilleri 254). Users' notions of interpreting are not always known to the intermediaries, and therefore, not under their control (Inghilleri 256). Moreover, since participants are not experts in communication, their expectations might conflict with the real requirements of the situation or even with the actual options available to the interpreter (Gentile, Ozolins, and Vasilakakos 31).

Not even professional interpreters are unanimous when it comes to defining their role beyond language transfer (Pöchhacker, "The Community Interpreter's Task" 63). Many studies point out discrepancies between the rules they declare when asked about the topic, and the actual decisions they make in their daily practice of the profession (Bot 34; Inghilleri 257; Valero Garcés and Gauthier Blasi 8; Anderson, "Interpreter Roles and Interpretation Studies"; Wadensjö, *Interpreting as Interaction* 9).

Tebble states that dialogue interpreters always play an independent role, since they are not to act as advocates for one of the parties, but as professionals who relay what is said by both sides (181-182). However, it is complicated to establish what is meant exactly by the adjective "independent" in dialogue interpreting. Ulllyatt, among other authors, emphasizes the fact that interpreters cannot be considered mere conduits in communication:

It is their task to encourage conversation management, to initiate exchanges, to ask questions, and to seek information which may be vital to a successful outcome of the interpreting assignment. It is not their task to empower anybody, but to take power and responsibility for themselves. (251)

Researchers usually agree that interpreting always entails a certain degree of mediation. According to Wadensjö, "it is not an empirical question whether interpreters are translators or mediators —they cannot avoid being both" (*Interpreting as Interaction* 206). Mediation is, indeed, key to defining role, as per Pöchhacker: "the conceptual issues underlying the view of interpreting as mediation are in a large part responsible for the controversy surrounding the community interpreter's role" ("Interpreting as Mediation" 9).

According to Pöchhacker, "different kinds of intermediaries can be posited along a continuum of active involvement and intervention, ranging from the least



involved, such as a neutral messenger, to the most involved, such as a negotiator” (“Interpreting as Mediation” 13). Several authors have attempted this type of interpreter’s role classification. Nevertheless, Pöchhacker notes that many of the concepts used overlap or are not clearly distinguishable. A great variety can also be seen in the denominations chosen by different experts (Roberts 10-14; Roy; Pöchhacker, “The Community Interpreter’s Task” 65; Wadensjö, *Interpreting as Interaction* 63-68). Plus, many classification proposals tend to be prescriptive instead of descriptive, and thus do not take into account the multiplicity and variability of communicative situations that a dialogue interpreter faces.

In a previous article on the interpreter’s role (Aguirre Fernández Bravo and Roca Ugorri), it was argued that it is useful to avoid the oversimplification of clear-cut role prototypes, considering it more productive to define the minimal and maximal poles of the mediation continuum, which allows the description of any given role as a relative position along said continuum. The minimal mediator is named “conduit interpreter” (the interpreter who does not go beyond the parties’ language needs, aspiring to maximal lexicographical fidelity to the original, regardless of the parties’ interests), and the maximal mediator is referred to as “advocate interpreter” (a non-neutral interpreter who goes beyond language transfer to perform additional tasks, such as advising, managing turns, etc.).

It is necessary to add new perspectives to this ongoing debate about the role of the dialogue interpreter in order to determine the factors that have repercussions on mediation. In this sense, Pragmatics could be a useful path. According to Valero Garcés, although research in community interpreting from the point of view of Pragmatics seems to be promising, studies “are still too few and too new” (97-98). This statement is in line with the opinion expressed by Mason and Stewart (51).

The negotiation of the interpreter’s role as a mediator between two parties requires the assumption of a certain positioning towards the interlocutors in different aspects and levels of the interaction. The concept of social distance specifically addresses this relative positioning; therefore, borrowing this notion from Pragmatics could enable dialogue interpreters to assess the degree of mediation to be put into practice in a specific communicative situation, which will, in turn, determine the role they will play.

## 2. THE NOTION OF SOCIAL DISTANCE

Social distance was first conceptualized in the domain of Sociology by Park as the degree of intimacy between individuals or groups. Following his proposal, Bogardus developed a scale to measure this distance, which has been profusely cited, discussed and adapted in the fields of Psychology and Sociology.

Decades later, Schumann studied a similar notion of social distance in the context of acculturation during second-language acquisition. According to this author, such a process is easier when the two social groups in contact (the language learners and the group of people whose language the former are trying to acquire) are closer in terms of political, cultural, technical or economic status. In order to



assess the social distance between two language groups, there are several factors that must be taken into account: (1) social dominance: whether the learning group is politically, culturally, technically or economically superior (dominant), equal (non-dominant), or inferior (subordinate); (2) integration pattern: whether the learning group has assimilated to the foreign culture, preserved their native one or adapted to the new intercultural situation; (3) enclosure: the degree to which the two groups have separate schools, religious centres, clubs, recreational facilities, professions, etc.; (4) intended length of residence: how long the learning group plans to stay in the target language area; (5) cohesiveness: the extent to which members of the learning group live, work and socialize together with those belonging to the target culture; (6) size of the learning group; (7) congruence of both cultures: the degree to which they are similar; (8) attitude: the ethnic stereotypes used by the two groups to value each other positively, neutrally, or negatively.

Although Schumann's view was originally conceived for a different purpose, it is easy to see that these factors could also be applicable to analyse dialogue interpreting situations, as they describe the relationship between two interacting social groups that speak different languages. Thus, it can be claimed that Schumann's notion of social distance is useful as a starting point.

The concept of social distance is part of the well-known theory of politeness developed by Brown and Levinson. These authors famously introduced the notion of "face," which derives from the original ideas of Goffman and has been studied with regard to interpreting by authors like Cambridge, Mason and Stewart, Pölabauer or Warchał, Łyda, and Jackiewicz. Brown and Levinson assume that all competent members of a society have (and know each other to have), on the one hand, rational capacities enabling them to reason and, on the other hand, face, "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (61). Face includes two aspects: negative face (basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, freedom of action and freedom from imposition) and positive face (the positive consistent self-image or "personality" claimed by interlocutors that crucially includes the desire for this self-image to be appreciated and approved of):

Thus, face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face. (61)

Together with relative power (P) and the ranking of the imposition (R) involved, social distance (D) is one of the sociological factors that determine the weightiness or seriousness of a face-threatening act (FTA), and, thus, the level of politeness which a speaker (S) uses when interacting with a hearer (H) (Brown and Levinson 74-76). Therefore, social distance is defined as follows:

D is a symmetric social dimension of similarity/difference within which S and H stand for the purposes of this act. In many cases (but not all), it is based on an assessment of the frequency of interaction and the kinds of material or non-material goods (including face) exchanged between S and H (or parties representing S or H,



or for whom S and H are representatives). An important part of the assessment of D will usually be measures of social distance based on stable social attributes. (76)

Social distance was also defined by Halliday and Hasan as one of the features of tenor, which is the element that relates the biographical details of the participants in communication to the details of the social structure (57). In their vision, social distance is a continuum with the following characteristics:

Social distance is a continuum, the two end-points of which may be referred to as MAXIMAL and MINIMAL. A maximal social distance obtains when the persons involved know each other through infrequent encounters only in the capacity of the agent of someone institutionalized activity and in the dyadic status that correlates with the agent role. [...] The more minimal the social distance, the greater the degree of familiarity between the carriers of the role. (57)

More recently, Escandell Vidal has developed a slightly different notion of social distance. She explains it as the relationship that exists between speaker and addressee, defined by the properties of individuals, both physical/intrinsic (age, sex, etc.) and social (relative power, authority, etc.). It involves objective and subjective, individual and social aspects. Our relationships, and, thus, our communication are conditioned by how we perceive others, or, better said, how we have learnt to perceive others (57-58).

According to Escandell Vidal, social distance is a complex measure made up by two dimensions (58-62):

- a) Familiarity: this dimension is related to (1) the degree of previous knowledge that speaker and addressee have acquired of each other; and (2) the degree of empathy that they achieve in their interaction. The more familiar speakers are to each other, the less social distance there is between them.
- b) Hierarchy: this second dimension addresses the flexibility with which societies stratify their members. Hierarchy is assessed according to two parameters, namely: (1) inherent physical characteristics of individuals, such as their gender, age or race; and (2) social roles, functions that have been socially assigned to individuals according to the role that each one of them is supposed to play in the social group. These roles depend on power and/or authority (boss-employee, doctor-patient, customer-waiter, etc.) and generate expectations regarding rights and obligations in communication. There is more social distance when a broader hierarchical gap exists between the parties.

It can be argued that Escandell Vidal's proposal is particularly comprehensive and can be seen as related to the notions of social distance developed by other authors, even to the precursory ideas of Park. The factors established by Schumann can be considered as different expressions of familiarity and/or hierarchy between the two social groups involved. Brown and Levinson's definition of social distance also appears to share some features with Escandell Vidal's, with the exception of



what the latter calls social roles, which the former seem to include under a different sociological factor, namely, power. There is also an apparent correspondence between Halliday and Hasan's view on social distance and familiarity.

### 3. SOCIAL DISTANCE IN DIALOGUE INTERPRETING

As it has been explained, in every interaction between two or more people there will be a certain degree of social distance. It can be inferred that such distance will also be present in interlinguistic encounters; therefore, coping with it will be an important part of the dialogue interpreter's task. Just being aware of the existence of this notion and, more importantly, of the two main dimensions that make it up, familiarity and hierarchy, could prove to be useful for the interpreter in order to analyse the communicative act.

Nevertheless, before any further explanation, it is essential to highlight that Escandell Vidal conceives of social distance as a perception (57-58). Therefore, it cannot be measured objectively, as Brown and Levinson already pointed out with regard to all politeness factors: "these are not intended as *sociologists'* ratings of *actual* power, distance, etc., but only as actors' assumptions of such ratings, assumed to be mutually assumed, at least within certain limits" (74-75). These authors also note that social distance is situational and, therefore, its value can be extremely different in similar circumstances in nonidentical contexts (79).

Since interpreter-mediated events are triadic exchanges, social distance in these cases can operate at two different levels: between the participants and between them and the interpreter. As Wadensjö emphasises, "in exploring the role of the dialogue interpreter one has to see her in relation to those *others* confirming or rejecting her in this role" ("Dialogue Interpreting and the Distribution of Responsibility" 115). Moreover, not only do the interacting parties have face; interpreters also have their own professional faces as neutral and impartial language experts, as Pöllabauer states (42). Warchał, Łyda, and Jackiewicz also recognize this professional face, to which they add "the face of the interpreter as a member of the society, with his or her beliefs, values, in-group loyalties and attitudes" (776-777). According to Brown and Levinson's theory, the recognition of the interpreter's face implies that this professional will also have to bear in mind his/her own social distances from both sides of the communicative act.

Therefore, it is worth distinguishing two different concepts: social distance between participants ( $SD_a$ ) and social distance between the interpreter and the interlocutors ( $SD_b$ ).

$SD_a$ , graphically represented in Figure 1, can be better understood with two extreme examples. In one possible situation, the interpretation users are two middle-aged businessmen with similar socioeconomic backgrounds who already know each other and have developed empathy in previous meetings. However, in a very different communicative act, the interpreter's interlocutors are an old male doctor and a young illiterate female patient who have never previously met. It is



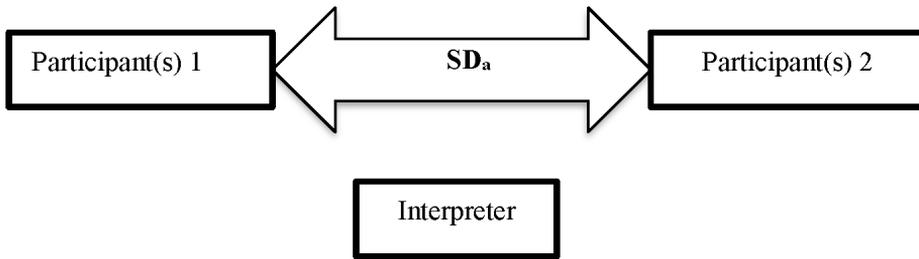


Figure 1. Social distance between participants ( $SD_a$ )

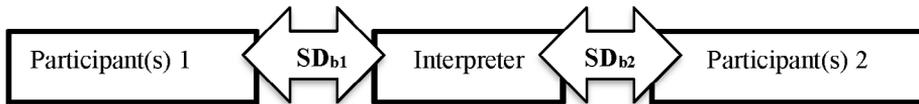


Figure 2. Social distances between interpreter and participants ( $SD_b$ )

apparent that both cases differ greatly in terms of the social distance separating the participants.

In analogy to the two examples presented for  $SD_a$ , it seems obvious that the social distance separating the interpreter from the interlocutors can vary significantly: they can share their ethnic descent or come from very different cultures; there can be a more or less clear asymmetry of power between them; they may have already worked together in previous situations; etc.

Additionally,  $SD_b$  can be further subdivided into two categories:  $SD_{b1}$ , for social distance between the interpreter and the participant(s) who speak(s) language 1, and  $SD_{b2}$ , to refer to the distance between the interlocutor(s) who speak(s) language 2 and the interpreter (see Figure 2). This is because the relationship with the interpreter can be very different for each one of the interpretation users or user groups. Indeed,  $SD_{b1}$  and  $SD_{b2}$  do not necessarily have to coincide: participant 1 could know the interpreter, while participant 2 could have never met him/her or even interacted with one; they could share or not physical features such as gender, race or age; one of the participants could have power over the interpreter, while the other could feel under his/her rule, etc.

It is important to note that  $SD_a$  and  $SD_b$  must be represented separately due to the fact that they are independent from each other. Although both will be argued to affect the interpreter, there is no way in which the relationship between the participants limits the relationships between the interpreter and each one of the interlocutors. For instance, the fact that the doctor and the patient presented in the second example provided for  $SD_a$  are not familiar with each other does not rule out the possibility that the interpreter may have already met one or both of them.



#### 4. SOCIAL DISTANCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIATION

Although several aspects could be affected by changes in  $SD_a$  and in both subtypes of  $SD_b$ , this paper focuses on the possible alterations of a key element: mediation, the task that, according to Wadensjö, is simultaneously present together with translation or relay in the interpreter's activity ("Dialogue Interpreting and the Distribution of Responsibility" 112-113).

Before analysing any possible connections between social distance and mediation, it is important to clarify that they do not imply an automatic effect on the interpreter's decisions, nor are they to be understood as prescriptive and unquestionable rules. Although the social distance in a communicative act might justify and/or favour a certain degree of mediation, it cannot be expected to restrict the interpreter's actual freedom of action or to determine a single, correct way to behave.

Inter-participant social distance can be tied to mediation by means of Alexieva's typology of interpreter-mediated events. According to this author, the more culturally specific a communicative act is, the more mediation it requires from the interpreter. Thus, a higher  $SD_a$  will involve an increase in mediation if such social distance causes cultural differences between the interlocutors to emerge.

Alexieva creates several subscales, which, in combination, determine the position of an interpreter-mediated event on a continuum that runs up from universality to cultural specificity. In one of these subscales, the universality pole is identified with "equality/solidarity", whereas "non-equality/power" describes the culturally specific end of the continuum. As the relationship between equal and solidary participants can be described in Escandell Vidal's terms as familiar (at least, regarding empathy) and non-hierarchical, a considerable social distance seems to be one of the features that contribute to culturally specific communicative situations.

Other experts also appear to support this view that social distance can be related to cultural difference. As stated above, Schumann names the congruence of the two relevant cultures among the factors that reduce social distance and, thus, facilitate the acquisition of a foreign language.

Besides fostering cultural or identity differences that need to be bridged, social distance between the participants can also be considered to encourage mediation pursuant to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Pöllabauer states that the need to save one's own or the other participants' face by using different politeness techniques is an important aspect of interpreter-mediated interactions (41-42). According to Mason and Stewart, the negotiation of face can be seen as part of the interpreter's role as a manager of the exchange (54). Therefore, the politeness techniques that the speaker and the hearer might resort to in order to counteract face-threatening acts (FTA) in monolingual situations can be carried out by the interpreter in triadic exchanges and accounted for as mediation. This behaviour was confirmed by Pöllabauer in her analysis of interpreters during asylum interviews, in which "if possible, they apparently opt to protect the other participants' (positive or negative) face" (50). As social distance is one of the contributing factors to the





weightiness of an FTA (Brown and Levinson 76), the more prevalent it is in the interaction, the more likely the interpreter will be to mediate.

If the social distance between the interlocutors ( $SD_a$ ) determines the degree of mediation, and consequently, the interpreter's role, it seems logical to wonder whether  $SD_b$  can operate the same way.

If two different  $SD_b$ s exist, one for the relationship of the interpreter with each one of the interlocutors ( $SD_{b1}$  and  $SD_{b2}$ ), it follows that they can be analysed separately. However, in a study focusing on mediation, this divide must be discarded. Mediation is, essentially, an activity carried out by an intermediary, someone who is defined by his or her position between two parties, instead of relative to just one of them. In the field under discussion, mediation cannot be understood but as a particular type of task that the dialogue interpreter performs as a third participant in order to bridge the linguistic and cultural differences between two other speakers. In fact, because of the nature of dialogue interpreting, it is questionable that interpreter-mediated events can be analysed as if they were composed of two different parts, since the communicative behaviour of a participant depends vastly on who his/her final audience is. Furthermore, it seems impossible to determine when an interpreter is mediating for each one of the parties: would it be during the relay of the interlocutor's words or when translating the other speaker's utterances to him/her?

According to the previous argument,  $SD_{b1}$  and  $SD_{b2}$  have to be studied interdependently in order to reach conclusions about their effects on mediation. A calculation of the average  $SD_b$  or a simple addition of its two components does not seem to account for reality, as it precludes the consideration of the more than likely asymmetry between the relationships of the interpreter with each one of the primary participants. This asymmetry plays a key role for mediation, since the position of an intermediary can only be defined as relative to both parties. This is why a comparison between  $SD_{b1}$  and  $SD_{b2}$  seems a much more suitable analysis factor for the purposes of this paper. Thus, it is useful to define one other type of social distance: the comparative social distance between the interpreter and each one of the primary participants, which will be hereinafter referred to as  $CSD_b$ . It can be calculated as the differential between  $SD_{b1}$  and  $SD_{b2}$ , as explained in Figure 3.

The arguments used to explain the connection of the social distance between the participants with mediation appear to apply consistently to  $CSD_b$ . It is possible to resort to the theory of Alexieva again, since she admits that the interpreter can be taken into consideration in her "equality/solidarity vs. non-equality/power" subscale (169). According to her ideas, as long as a higher  $CSD_b$  entails an increase in the cultural specificity of the communicative act, it will require more mediation from the interpreter. In the cases in which the interpreter has a significantly greater familiarity or a much less hierarchical relationship with only one of the speakers, the professional and this interlocutor can be seen as equal and solidary, but this only emphasises the contrast with the situation of the other participant. The differential in  $SD_b$ , therefore, places the communicative act as a whole closer to the "non-equality/power" pole, a position that contributes to cultural specificity and, thus, fosters mediation.



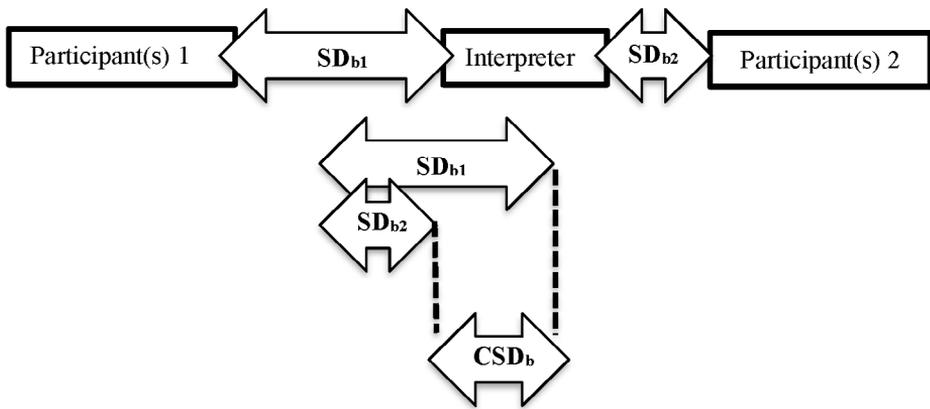


Figure 3. Comparative Social Distance between interpreter and participants.

It has been mentioned that Schumann appears to associate social distance with culturally specific situations and this seems to be true of  $CSD_b$  as well. One of the reasons why the interpreter and one of the interlocutors may have a closer social distance is their belonging to the same culture. In this sense, the other party is isolated and, as a consequence, the interpreter-mediated event can be considered polarized, that is, more specific in terms of culture, which calls for mediation according to Alexieva.

Regarding Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, as interpreters have their own faces, they will be subject to suffering FTAs and, consequently, to carrying out politeness strategies as a particular type of mediation. Considering that social distance is one of the factors that determine the seriousness of FTAs (Brown and Levinson 76), it is interesting to wonder in which particular way  $CSD_b$  can threaten an interpreter's face. It is possible to affirm that, in situations in which the social distance between the interpreter and each one of the participants differs greatly, the professionals have to deal with a challenge to their impartiality, an aspect of their face that, according to Pöllabauer, they try to protect (50).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper is an attempt to elucidate the dynamics of social distance in dialogue interpreting. The identification of familiarity and hierarchy as its components and the distinction between  $SD_a$  and  $SD_b$ , as well as the notion of  $CSD_b$ , can be alleged to have potential as a framework for a general analysis of triadic communicative acts. This can be useful for professional practice and interpreter training. In addition, these notions could open new paths for interdisciplinary research.

The present paper claims that both the social distance existing between the participants ( $SD_a$ ) and the comparative social distance ( $CSD_b$ ) arising from the

relationship between each one of the parties with the interpreter ( $SD_{b1}$  and  $SD_{b2}$ ) can encourage a certain degree of interpreter mediation. Through cultural specificity and politeness theory, it has been argued that the greater the social distance, the more mediation is likely to occur. This is important for interpreting performance because mediation is relevant for the interpreter's role. Since it has been suggested that an increase in mediation brings the interpreter closer to being an advocate, it can be deemed that a high social distance, at least, tempts the interpreter to assume such a role, whereas more familiar and hierarchically equal interlocutors call for a smaller degree of intervention from the interpreter and, thus, a behaviour that is nearer to the conduit pole of the mediation continuum.

For professional dialogue interpreters, being aware of the close relationship between social distance and mediation can help them make informed decisions about their role. Interpreter training should also cover this aspect, including specific pedagogically adapted exercises to teach trainees that familiarity and hierarchy can be key pragmatic factors when negotiating their role in communication.

Regarding research, it could be interesting to explore the interplay between social distance and mediation in the different fields of dialogue interpreting. It is reasonable to think that more mediation strategies will be required in community interpreting, where users are further from each other in terms of familiarity and hierarchy, contrary to the usual situation in business interpreting, where clients tend to be closer with regard to these two parameters.

The natural step that follows this paper is the development of a methodology for measuring the different constructs ( $SD_a$ ,  $SD_b$  and  $CSD_b$ ), as well as the statistical testing of the reliability and validity of such tool, in order to carry out empirical studies in different fields of dialogue interpreting. It is important to bear in mind, as it was previously explained, that social distance cannot be measured objectively, since it only exists as a subjective perception. Therefore, any statistical tool should aim at assessing assumed social distances.

Empirical studies researching the connection between social distance, mediation, and the role of the dialogue interpreter could also be illuminating. It has been argued that social distance may encourage interpreters to mediate, but it does not condition them automatically to do so, nor does it determine a single appropriate behaviour. As interpreters are free to decide the degree of mediation they want to put into practice, it is essential to study whether their role choices could alter any of the social distances involved in the communicative act. A bidirectional approach to social distance (as an aspect that both influences mediation and is affected by it) seems to be promising for future research.

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