

Peter Davies
University of Edinburgh, UK

Knowledge, testimony, translation: interpreters at the first Frankfurt Auschwitz trial

Where their work is acknowledged at all, courtroom interpreters are often seen as mediators, making mutually comprehensible the statements by the various participants in the courtroom exchanges. Their job is not to interpret at all, but to stay objective; their expertise may be drawn on to explain cultural differences in the understanding of legal concepts, but otherwise codes of professional ethics oblige them to preserve a strict neutrality.

There are significant problems with this view, as studies of courtroom interpreting have shown (e.g., Inghilleri 2012). Depending on the mode of interpreting, it is the interpreter who determines the structure, rhythm, duration and pacing of the interpreted courtroom exchange, and interpreters exercise a significant degree of agency in organising the discourse of witness questioning. The presence of the interpreter influences the framing of testimony even before he or she begins to translate. A convenient fiction of neutrality is necessary for the court to function, but it masks a multitude of occurrences, processes and attitudes that are of vital interest for scholars of Holocaust testimony.

This paper considers interpreted courtroom testimonies as communicative exchanges evolving in time and within a complex institutional and discursive context. Although codes of professional ethics require strict neutrality, the power dynamics of the Frankfurt trial mean that there is no neutral position for the interpreters to take up: they occupy an ambiguous position between enabling testimony to take place and be understood, and making witnesses available to the dominant knowledge processes of the court.

I ask what other kinds of knowledge are available when our view is shifted away from questions of historical or juridical evidence, and when the interactions between interpreters and other trial participants are analysed in their own right.