



Interpreters vs Machines: Can Interpreters Survive in an AI-Dominated World?

Jonathan Downie

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Review by Amanda Haste. First published online 23 December 2019.

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The job of language professionals such as translators and interpreters is to convey meaning, while considering cultural differences and expectations, shifts in register⁶¹ as well as content. While translators work with the written word and can revise their work at their own pace, interpreters work “live” with the spoken word. Both translators and interpreters are nowadays often required to use the available technological resources such as Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) and Machine Interpreting or “speech translation” software which are deemed to improve productivity and consistency, and ultimately to reduce the cost to the client). As technology advances, we are often told that Machine Translation and Machine Interpreting have become so effective that they can replace the need for human intervention. But how realistic is this,

and how can interpreters in particular ensure their future survival, while making best use of the advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the tools available to them?

In *Interpreters vs Machines* consultant interpreter Jonathan Downie recognizes that “interpreting is under threat like never before” (xi) and asks whether computers might soon be able to “make the final leap” to “replacing humans”. He goes on to unpack the complex work of interpreting to explore the qualities that AI will need to accomplish if it is to replace human interpreters, and offers practical advice on how interpreters themselves can respond to this threat, and thus to take charge of their own future.

Downie uses an accessible, conversational register, and demonstrates a solid understanding of current research in Interpreting Studies, illustrating his points through interesting case studies which draw the reader into the complex and fascinating world of interpreting. He has chosen to construct *Interpreters vs Machines* “like a good computer game,” in which the reader is

⁶¹ <https://www.thoughtco.com/register-language-style-1692038>

taken through five “levels” which introduce them to the basics of what interpreting is and how it is done, progressing through a detailed schema for “keeping humans at the forefront of interpreting” (xii).

In Level 1, Chapter 1 asks “What is Interpreting” and compares the “unmistakably robotic” conduit model in which interpreters are present simply to “process language” with the triadic model in which interpreters are “partners and participants” who “work with people to make meaning” and that this is what makes interpreting “a very human occupation” (15). Cognitive models are clearly explained (24), as is the all-important fact that “context changes everything” (26-29). Chapter 2 explores the models and theories produced by the relatively new discipline of Translation Studies, while recognizing that interpreting is undeniably an interpersonal skill, and Chapter 3 then explores how computers “interpret” – the author’s use of quotation marks is deliberate.

Level 2 (Chapters 4 and 5) delves into interpreters’ presentation of themselves, setting this against the often “wild and nearly unbelievable claims” (xiii) of the machine interpreting industry. Level 3 (Chapters 6-9) “Choose Your Interpreting Future” provides a toolbox for interpreters to negotiate a future where human interpreting is the gold standard of the language industry.

In Level 4 (Chapters 10-13) “Translating to Beat the Bots” Downie identifies the problem of effective marketing for human interpreters, and that this needs to be addressed if interpreters are to not only survive but thrive. There is “a yawning gap between understanding a language and being able to understand what the language is doing” (137), and Downie argues in Chapter 12 “Deliver more than words” that while “machines can’t ever ‘get it’ ... ‘humans can’ and that ‘maybe the greatest thing we have to sell is precisely our humanity’” (125).

The ‘game’ culminates in Level 5 “Game Over” (or maybe not) (143) in which Downie acknowledges that his book “has just scratched the surface” and that the technology is advancing so fast that some of what was considered state-of-the-art when the book was written will already be “yesterday’s news” by the time it is read (150). That said, he challenges his fellow professional interpreters to continue to “make a difference” at conferences, courts, doctors’ surgeries and anywhere else where they work, by being prepared to “continually learn, grow and deliver added value ... using whichever technologies are appropriate”: “in an

age of growing artificial intelligence, it is down to human intelligence to deliver when it really matters” (150).

Interpreters vs Machines is an intelligently written work, with a sound theoretical basis. Well referenced, with a useful list of works cited for each chapter as well as a comprehensive bibliography, its clear, jargon-free explanations will please and inform the non-specialist, while providing an eminently practical resource for the professional interpreter to enrich their professional life. This reviewer has no hesitation in recommending it.

Amanda Haste is a Franco-British academic translator and musicologist whose research interests include identity construction through music and language. She is a member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (London, England) and teaches courses in Translation and in English for Specific Purposes as adjunct faculty at Aix-Marseille University, France. Her largely ethnographic research has been published in leading journals and in books by major editors such as Palgrave MacMillan, Taylor & Francis, and Routledge; she co-authored (with Prof. James Block, DePaul University) Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization (Paris: Ex Modio, 2015), and she is currently researching a monograph on the British Colony in Marseille.