

## Book review

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*Simultaneous Interpreting from a Signed into a Spoken Language: Quality, Cognitive Overload, and Strategies*, by Jihong Wang. Taylor & Francis: Abingdon, 2021. 261 pp. Paperback £36.99, Hardback £130, eBook £27.74. ISBN 9780367757885

**Reviewed by:** Isabelle Heyerick , University of Dublin, Ireland

Any book on simultaneous interpreting stating that “The findings highlight the fact that simultaneous interpreting is a complex and conscious decision-making process” (p. 108) will have my full attention. In the volume *Simultaneous interpreting from a signed into a spoken language: Quality, cognitive overload, and strategies*, Jihon Wang attempts to unravel this complexity. As we learn from the foreword by Jemina Napier, Wang (2013) has re-engaged with the data from her thesis, which looked at the working memory in signed language interpreting (SLI). The book is not based on her doctoral thesis, even though it has a thesis-like structure and style, but reports on a new study conducted on the data collected at that time. This is briefly mentioned in the Acknowledgement section. When studying interpreters’ performances, processes, and quality, I believe it is essential to be transparent about when data were gathered to contextualise the study. Over the past 8 years, Sign Language Interpreting Studies (SLIS) and training programmes have made significant progress. Interpreting service users’ views and expectations have evolved, which in turn has influenced interpreter training and standards. As a result, some of the study’s conclusions might not be entirely accurate in the current context. This also transpires in certain statements, such as for instance that *interpreting from a signed to a spoken language* is a new term replacing the outdated *voicing* (p. 3). The problem with the term *voicing* has been noticed and discussed for some time within the field (see Bentley-Sassaman, 2015). Despite these observations, Wang presents an impressive study. She took on the complex task of investigating the interpreting process incorporating various aspects such as cognitive load, working memory, processing time, and strategies. The foreword states that the book is aimed at a broad readership; however, given the style and structure it is more geared towards academics and researchers.

The volume starts with the rationale for the study and the researcher’s background. Wang clarifies that she is a spoken language interpreter and has limited knowledge of the



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signed language involved in the study, Auslan (the signed language used in Australia). It is exciting to see a spoken language interpreter engage with research on SLI, as it demonstrates how spoken and signed language interpreting is interconnected (Buzungu & Hansen, 2020; Gile & Napier, 2020). However, the inevitable impact of the author's positionality on the study's design is not addressed at this point; it is referred to in the Acknowledgement section and dealt with in Chapter 3. The opening chapter would have benefitted from a clear positionality statement. It would improve transparency and introduce the author's voice, which is absent in the text. The lack of the author's voice contributes to the formal academic style which does not draw the reader in. Chapter 1 continues to introduce the focus of the book which is quality assessment, cognitive processes, and effective strategies regarding simultaneous conference interpreting from a signed language (Auslan) to a spoken language (English). The research questions and key concepts with regard to simultaneous interpreting are contextualised. This is particularly important when investigating strategies, as they can be approached as problem-solving (Bartłomiejczyk, 2006; Gile, 1995, 2009; Kalina, 1998; Riccardi, 2005; Wang, 2012; this book), or as a conscious decision that allows the interpreter to either solve a problem or reach their goal (Gambier, 2010; Heyerick, 2021; Jääskeläinen, 2009; Napier, 2002). However, this discussion would have been more suitably placed in Chapter 2. The opening chapter goes on to explain the significance of the study which is highlighted by the fact that this particular directionality is understudied in SLIS, to which the author returns in Chapter 2.

The literature review (Chapter 2) covers topics relevant to this study: directionality, cognitive load, processing time, working memory, and the already briefly discussed strategies. Wang outlines the specific interpreting directionality this work focuses on, citing three empirical studies that investigated directionality in SLI. These date back to 2013 (Nicodemus and Emmorey, 2013) and 2015 (Nicodemus and Emmorey, 2015; Wang and Napier, 2015), confirming that this book (2021) addresses an important topic that has been overlooked for a while. As a reader, this raises questions as to why it did not remain on the SLIS research agenda? The author explains this by stating that SLIs do not predominantly engage with this directionality and that deaf interpreting service users engage in extra labour (Brunson, 2011; Heyerick, 2022) to ensure that the signed to spoken language interpretation is successful. Wang does not support the claim that the bulk of SLI happens from a spoken to a signed modality by data or references. Moreover, she presupposes that most SLI assignments are exclusively mono-directional, which is rarely the case (Heyerick, 2021; Pöchhacker, 2004). In addition, she does not relate this back to the rise of deaf professionals who increasingly request signed to spoken interpretation, which was mentioned in the first chapter. Chapter 2 moves on to cognitive load and, as this is intricately linked to capacity, Wang introduces Gile's (1983, 1995, 2009) Tightrope Hypothesis and Effort Model. She proposes an adaptation for simultaneous signed to spoken language interpreting, acknowledging the role of working memory, to include short- and long-term memory. Following this, processing time in simultaneous interpreting is explored, covering the various ranges, the high variability in processing time used by interpreters, and factors influencing interpreters' processing time and performance. Consequently, one problem trigger (or interpreting challenge) is discussed, namely, the occurrence of numbers in a source text. Surprisingly, the other problem trigger the study investigates (end negation) is not covered in this chapter but is introduced in Chapter 5

and discussed in Chapter 7. At the same time, Wang mentions three approaches to measure cognitive load but leaves the reader wondering how they are relevant to this study.

Chapter 3 offers a highly useful description of the research questions, the methodology used, and the analytical framework. It presents a meticulous account of how the corpus was created, how the interpreting performances were assessed, and how the interpretations and retrospective interviews were analysed. However, the author does not explain how processing time was measured until Chapter 5. This adds to the fragmented nature of the text and obscures the bigger picture. Nonetheless, the detailed and comprehensive description of the study's research design and methodology serves as a blueprint for further research.

The following four chapters present the results of the study, with Chapter 4 addressing the first research question and the other three chapters each treating a certain aspect of research questions two and three. It is unclear why the author favoured this fragmented structure which leads to many repetitions and leaves the reader to connect the dots without much guidance.

Chapter 4 announces that it will address the first research question regarding interpreting challenges when working from a signed to a spoken language. As the reader proceeds, it becomes clear that the chapter discusses much more. It tackles the quality of the interpretations, the raters' assessments, the influence of native signer and non-native signer status on the interpreting performance, the identified interpreting challenges, and applied coping strategies. The chapter leaves much to unpack regarding the challenges interpreters encountered because of the deaf presenter's signing style. It seems that the training these SLIs received did not (and maybe still does not) prepare them to deal with (trans)linguaging and perceived notions of language "boundaries" (see Kusters et al., 2017). In addition, interpreters noted that "they are familiar with many subjects (e.g., disability discrimination) discussed in spoken language rather than in signed language" (p. 87) which challenged them when working from a signed into a spoken language. This finding gives rise to at least two critical notes the author fails to include. The first one being that compared to 8 years ago, when the data were collected, interpreters might now have more exposure to signed discourse on certain topics. Second, that rather than subject unfamiliarity the inability to transfer acquired knowledge between directionalities and languages seems to be an issue. If interpreters have interpreted these topics from a spoken to a signed language, how is it that they struggle to interpret the same content from a signed to a spoken language? And is directionality an influencing factor? Unfortunately, the chapter does not explore this. Wang does formulate recommendations for SLIs and training programmes throughout the discussion of the various findings. These might have been better placed in the final chapter which reports on implications and recommendations.

Chapter 5 addresses the second and third research questions. It examines onset processing time and the influence on (in)accurate renditions with regard to interpreting numbers. As a whole, the chapter is quite technical, dense, and at times confusing. The description of the analysis on single sentence units contradicts information provided in Chapter 3 which specified a discourse-to-discourse rather than a sentence-to-sentence comparison. The tables provided are challenging to decipher and do not always support the discussion. A solid understanding of statistics is required to fully grasp the conclusions drawn. Nonetheless, the detailed account of how onset processing time was

measured and analysed will allow researchers to replicate this method for other signed and spoken language combinations. This will help to expand our understanding of processing time in SLI.

As mentioned, Chapter 6 also contributes to answering the second and third research questions by focussing on cognitive overload in relation to the interpretation of sentences containing numbers. As in Chapter 5, it discusses which coping strategies interpreters applied even though the analysis of cognitive overload differs from the one outlined in Chapter 5. Cognitive load in number processing was analysed looking at cluster challenges, taking into account that previous and consequent fragments of the source and target text influence processing time and that interpreters deal with texts and contexts rather than with single unit sentences. This is in line with what was described in Chapter 3.

Chapter 7 continues to address the second and third research questions by turning our attention to cognitive overload when interpreting sentences containing end negation. As in the previous chapters, it relates which effective strategies interpreters applied to cope with this particular challenge. The reader is further immersed in data, analysis, and results of various aspects of the interpreting process. This gives the impression that the chapter reports on miscellaneous aspects that could not be fitted in anywhere else. Wang tries to wrap it all together with a blanket statement that “simultaneous interpreting performance is typically imperfect despite professional interpreters’ best efforts” (p. 214), but the focus seems to be lost.

The final chapter (Chapter 8) summarises the answers to the three research questions, which inevitably results in more repetition, and the author fails to string the various aspects of the study together. This is a pity, as Wang has processed a wealth of information on topics that greatly serves SLIS. The chapter provides an overview of the key findings, but offers little critical discussion or reflection of how these findings can reshape our understanding of the interpreting process and how directionality plays a role. Many of the findings point to a high inter- and intra-variability among interpreters, which has been corroborated by other studies (for instance Bartłomiejczyk, 2006; Heyerick, 2021), but this is not further addressed. Wang provides a list of key knowledge and skills SLIs need to be successful at signed to spoken language interpreting. Although it identifies useful requirements, it is a rather meagre result for what is an impressive study. Furthermore, the implications of the findings read as mere do’s and don’ts lists and some recommendations contradict points put forward by the author in the introductory chapters. In Chapter 1 (p. 13), Wang posits that spoken language interpreters work is unimodal, that is, verbal-auditory. On one hand, this statement takes away from the fact that spoken language also has gestural layers and is embodied, allowing speakers (and interpreters) to make use of multimodal approaches to (re)create meaning. On the other hand, it also contradicts Wang’s recommendation for spoken language interpreters and presenters to use eye contact to achieve successful interpreting performances, a practice which recently has been scrutinised by some SLIS scholars (see De Meulder & Stone, 2023). Perhaps more problematic are the implications for deaf professionals, which resembles a list of recommendations portraying extra labour (Brunson, 2011; Heyerick, 2022). Whereas it is known that deaf professionals do engage in this extra work to accommodate interpreters by adjusting their signing pace, style, and linguistic choices, a critical discussion of these practices with input from deaf professionals should have been included.

In conclusion, despite obvious issues with style and structure, the book offers the reader a wealth of information on multiple topics regarding the interpreting process. The detailed account of the different methods used to engage with the data contributes to the field and paves the way for further research. The book is therefore a valuable resource for other researchers and academics. It has the potential to support and enhance the signed to spoken language interpreting process but fails to engage with the non-academic reader. If a second edition is considered, the author could include critical questions inviting the reader to reflect on theory versus (their own) practice to foreground the importance of the results for a varied audience, be it deaf professionals, interpreters, or interpreter educators. In its current form, it is hard to grasp the bigger picture and to piece together the key message(s) of the book.

## ORCID iD

Isabelle Heyerick  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9514-2591>

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## Biography

Dr Isabelle Heyerick (she/her) is Assistant Professor in Applied Sign Linguistics at the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. Her area of expertise is signed language linguistics and signed language interpreting. Her research is situated on the intersection of (applied) linguistics, intercultural studies, and language ideologies.