



# “It’s not just words, it’s the feeling, the passion, the emotions”: an ethnography of affect in interpreters’ practices in contemporary Japan

DOI:

[10.1080/1683478X.2019.1632546](https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2019.1632546)

## Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

## Citation for published version (APA):

Giustini, D. (2019). “It’s not just words, it’s the feeling, the passion, the emotions”: an ethnography of affect in interpreters’ practices in contemporary Japan. *Asian Anthropology*, 1-17.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2019.1632546>

## Published in:

Asian Anthropology

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**“It’s not just words, it’s the feeling, the passion, the emotions”: An ethnography of affect in interpreters’ practices in contemporary Japan**

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# **“It’s not just words, it’s the feeling, the passion, the emotions”: An ethnography of affect in interpreters’ practices in contemporary Japan**

## **Abstract**

This article explores the discursive mediation of affect in the professional practice of interpreting in contemporary Japan. It argues that affective practices, applied to the observation of interpreters' bodily and discursive performances, show that the fabricated distinction between reason and emotion present in the professional discourse of interpreting is misaligned with the reality of interpreters' everyday engagement. By drawing upon affect theory and teleo-affective skills as conceptualized in practice theory, the article offers a sensory ethnography of Japanese interpreters, showing that by negotiating their ethical position as “neutral” professionals, interpreters expertly manage affects between the parties involved in the interaction, giving a discursive, political, and cultural nature to emotions. The article shows that the reality of reason and emotion enmeshing in everyday cultural life requires the interpreter to suture the interpreting practice's artificial division back together, using their affective professional skills of feeling with the world, which ultimately positively impact users and ensure successful communication services.

Keywords: Japan; interpreters; affect; sensory ethnography; practice theory

## **Introduction**

Among the most relevant developments in social research in the past two decades, there has been a renewed interest in the significance of affect in making sense of intersubjective intensity, an awareness that political and social matters invite embodied dynamics pertaining to bodily feelings (Massumi 2002; Ahmed 2013; Thrift 2004; Clough and Halley 2007).

This awareness has brought about the development of research lines programmatically defined as the “affective turn” (Halley and Clough 2007). Affect has

re-emerged as a conceptual tool generally supported by ideas proposed by readings of the philosophers Deleuze (1990) and Spinoza (1677/1973). In particular, Massumi's interpretation of affect, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari in his foreword to *A Thousand Plateaus*, is the most acknowledged:

affect is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act...with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include 'mental' or ideal bodies (Massumi 1987: xvii in Deleuze and Guattari).

This view of affect has been pivotal in advancing the debate in social sciences that "human beings are corporeal creatures imbued with subliminal resonances," reflecting a desire to recognize the way the world moves us (Wetherell 2015, 436). Paying attention to feelings as produced through the interaction between self and world – as a process of entanglement – means taking into account not only conscious feelings, but also what is felt at the bodily level (Labanyi 2011). These studies have been valuable in re-focusing on the body as a locus of feelings as well as practical knowledge, with which we affectively dwell in the world (Ingold 2000).<sup>1</sup> Massumi (2014) emphasises that "bodying" coincides with "the movement of thought," and underlines that "direct perception" expresses and transmits affects exceeding rationality and practical skills, being instead a mode of awareness that in itself is embodied affective attunement. Massumi further argues that affect influences our thinking and knowledge but is separate from these, both independent of and prior to intentions and meanings, acting as "irreducibly bodily and autonomic" processes (Massumi 2002: 28) flowing under the surface of conscious awareness and rationality. The result, I argue, is that

action and behaviour are entangled with affective dispositions that capture the relations between human bodies, their perceptions, and their actions, pointing to the fact that human beings have skilful capacities for meaning-making (Wetherell 2015).

This consideration leads to the heart of the theorization of affect in relation to discourse. For affect theorists, “there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary for affect” (Massumi 2002, 88), since affective processes happen beyond, below and past discourse and thus escape linguistic reductions. It is through emotions, the sociolinguistic and cultural expression of affect, that this can be fixed in a discursive way as the quality of certain experiences (Massumi 1995, 88). Emotions require a subject and are the capture of affect, meaning that they can be interpreted and are generated within a context as the social and cultural response to feelings and are classified as the outer display of feelings, describable linguistically by words such as “happiness,” or “sadness” (Massumi 2002; Nathanson 1994; Probyn 2005).

In the case of the professional practice of interpreting, however, capacities for meaning-making entail that the enmeshing of reason and emotions, and the presence of affect, is rejected. Codes of ethics and conduct for interpreters, including Japan, show that the principle of neutrality is universally and internationally held to be valid across all settings and situations (see Setton and Dawrant 2016; Torikai 2009). Neutrality means that, as professional interlingual and intercultural communicators, interpreters are employed as the “voice” for either party they are working for. They are bound by their codes and training to convey accurately the meaning of utterances without any distortion, change, or opinion, and to block their own feelings to not create disservice to the client. However, interpreters are human beings, and experience feelings and emotions. Although the neutrality norm remains the dominant ideology in the professional discourse, research has shown that interpreters, on the basis of their

expertise, may judge how and when to significantly alter the message or the feelings involved in an interaction to better convey meaning and emotions across language and cultural barriers (e.g. see Giustini 2018; Tiselius 2018). Therefore, the practice of interpreting and its discourse advance a reason/emotion split which is reflected in the supposed neutral role of the interpreter. The engagement of interpreters with everyday working assignments in order to overcome their normative neutral positioning, as I will show, reveals their attempts to re-connect the fracture of reason and emotion in the interpreting practice thanks to their affective skills of linguistic mediation.

Drawing on the works of Catherine Lutz (2017) and Sara Ahmed (2013), in this paper I analyze the normative Western imposition that reason and emotions are separated as a discourse reproduced in the profession of interpreting. By considering the case of Japanese interpreters and their expertise, I address the role of language and culture in attuning the somatic expression of the world with corporeal-affective reactions in interpreters' professional engagements. I argue that interpreters manage the complexity of their normative neutral role and suture back together the reason/emotion split advanced in the interpreting practice through their "practices of feeling with the world" (De Antoni and Dumouchel 2017) and "affective practices" (Wetherell 2015), which are entangled in everyday social and cultural life and emerging in discourse.

Pursuing the "affective turn" requires that we account for how affect is crucial to how we experience the world in a cultural and discursive way through embodied engagement. In the first section of this article, I discuss affect by adopting a praxeological perspective from sociology (particularly the works of Schatzki 1996, Reckwitz 2012, and Wetherell 2015), which has powerfully dialogued with issues of affect in social practices. In the second section, since affect has been framed as an intensity partially escaping knowledge, reason, and language, I problematize the

question of methodologically accounting for affect. I do so by joining ethnographic methodologies of knowledge production to experiential and multisensory fieldwork, or “sensory ethnography” (Pink 2009). I argue that paying attention to the senses is a viable solution to the complex problem of operationalizing affect in order to produce ethnographic data.

In the empirical sections of this article, I account for affect through an ethnography of conference interpreters in Japan. As linguistic experts *par excellence* – professionals mediating between two parties without a language in common – interpreters are constrained by institutional regulations, negotiated habits, and skills, to appear and act as “neutral” to help their clients achieve the goal of communication and the pursuit of their interests. Through my ethnographic study of interpreters in Japan, I show that we can effectively explore affect by attending to the senses: interpreters, thanks to their affective and linguistic skills, are able as professionals to sew back together the artificial division between emotions and reason created by the professional discourse of interpreting. In everyday life, these enmesh, and their enmeshing requires that the Japanese interpreters in my study manage the accepted view of their ethical role as neutral, acting to close this artificial division.

### **What is the profession of conference interpreting and how does it work in Japan?**

Conference interpreting is a profession that seeks to create mutual understanding between speakers of different languages. Through the expert provision of communication services in multilingual encounters, conference interpreters translate orally the meaning of a speaker's message in one language into another language for participants who would not otherwise understand. At the international level, it is widely used, and is part of the daily diplomatic proceedings of organizations such as the United Nations or European institutions. In Japan, more than elsewhere – because of its

fundamentally monolingual nature – interpreting is of vital importance for intercultural communication and a thriving reality in the labor market, with highly trained interpreters working mainly between English and Japanese, as the demand for other languages is scarce (Giustini 2017).

A thorough knowledge of one’s working languages is a prerequisite to work as an interpreter, but it is also necessary to have cultural awareness, specialization in certain areas (e.g. business, diplomacy), and high-level skill in the techniques of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. In consecutive interpreting, which is used mainly during small meetings, the interpreter listens to the original message of the speaker and waits until s/he finishes the speech or part of it before translating it into the other language to the audience, relying on short-term memory and note-taking. Interpreters working in simultaneous interpreting listen to the voice of the speaker through headphones. The audience, through headphones, listens to the interpreters, who almost instantaneously listen, process, translate, and speak the message into the other language in a continuous flow of communication.

In Japan, interpreting is performed in a number of high-stake settings, from NHK television programs, to the government, to university lectures, business negotiations, meetings of NGOs, corporate boards, diplomatic encounters and international organisations’ councils. In all these settings, interpreters may have a critical impact, since the facilitation of mutual understanding “affects” the individuals involved. For instance, it can allow two business parties to successfully set up a marketing strategy. At the same time, interpreters themselves may be affected by the situation and the surroundings on the job, with implications for their performance. For this reason, in the interpreting profession there are codes of ethics and professional conduct, which set out rules of behavior for interpreters, such as “neutrality.” Neutrality



means that the interpreter must perform without letting any personal view or emotion interfere with the communication, remaining unbiased and not siding ideologically with any party. Interpreters' neutrality is reflected in their linguistic renditions, which should remain accurate to the original regardless of how disagreeable the speakers' perspective and utterances might be. This rule is aimed at guaranteeing a transparent, high-quality interpretation, where the interpreter is emotionally detached. Of course, interpreters can never disregard that they affect and are affected. This affectivity dimension and its relation to neutrality has been addressed in a few recent interpreting studies, such as Sari Hokkanen's (2017) innovative auto-ethnography of church interpreting. She argues that interpreters' engagement with linguistic encounters is based on professional competence through which they balance bodily sensations of involvement and detachment. Likewise, Korpala and Jasielska (2018) question interpreters' neutrality by accounting for the "emotional contagion" felt by interpreters' responding to the content of the speeches they interpret, as reflected both in their bodily reaction and their self-reported emotions.

Taking these views into consideration, I problematize affect in interpreting in the Japanese context using a practice-theory framework, to account for the fracture of emotion and reason created by the professional discourse of interpreting, and link affect back to the discursive dimension within interpreted encounters.

### **Locating affect in practice theories**

Emerging at the crossroads of anthropology, sociology, and phenomenology, theories of practice are linked by the ontological position that "practices," which are routinized performative endeavours – such as teaching and cooking – instead of individuals or social structures, are the basic unit through which to examine social life (Warde and Southerton 2012). Therefore, practices are at a "meso" level of analysis and aim to offer a

remedy to dualisms such as actor/system, body/mind, social/material, and reason/emotion. In using this approach, I enter the ranks of those sociologists and anthropologists such as Sara Ahmed (2004), who have argued that affects should be regarded as social and cultural practices.

Practices exist through the recurrent enactments of performances; through “doing” and “feeling,” the patterns of practices become meaningful. The importance of affective processes was initially captured by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as internalised dispositions (1977), and Ortner’s (1984) “complex subjectivities,” which highlight the role of bodily knowledge in everyday action “as a way of understanding and being in the world” (Nicolini 2012, 58). While these concepts still inform practice theories, questions about affectivity have more explicitly been integrated by a “second wave” of practice theory as proposed by the American social philosopher Theodore Schatzki. Schatzki elaborated the most systematic version of a praxeological approach, leaning on Wittgenstein and Deleuze, to reconcile poststructuralist and posthumanist ontologies, which I make use of in this article.

The actions that comprise practices are linked together by practical understanding, normativity, and teleo-affectivity as meaning-making activities (Schatzki 1996; Reckwitz 2002). Practical understanding is the knowledge required to be a competent member of the practice (Reckwitz 2002). In the interpreting profession, practical understanding is a set of collectively shared and mutually intelligible skills, techniques, and qualities such as knowing how to perform a simultaneous interpretation, knowing how to identify cultural references in a speech, and knowing how to respond to fast speakers.

Additionally, appropriate conduct within a certain practice is established through normativity (Savigny et al. 2001). As professional bodies invested with

affective skills of communication and mediation, the interpreters' normative view is that of neutral bodies – not affecting others (and discourse) and not being affected by others. As such, interpreters' supposed neutrality collapses the management of affects and emotions into a dimension of pure reason, with no room for emotion. However, although modes of affecting and being affected may vary in terms of intensity, interpretation, and direction, complete affect neutrality and absence of emotions is hardly conceivable (Reckwitz 2012), even if collectively organized by codified norms (Ahmed 2010, 37). Every social practice has in fact a built-in affective dimension and is tuned affectively in a particular way (Seyfert 2011). This is referred to as “teleo-affectivity,” which refers to individuals “embracing ends...beliefs, emotions and moods” (Schatzki 1996, 89), with “teleo” signifying that their actions are goal-oriented, and “affective” that these actions matter to individuals.

Held together by the weight of knowledge, affectivity, and normativity, every social practice implies a use of senses and perceptions, with agents affected in practice-specific ways, and in turn affecting others (Reckwitz 2012, 249). Therefore, a praxeological perspective offers the advantage of linking the dualistic fracture of affective and sensory processes advanced by the professional discourse of interpreting back to activities “which always involve limitless amounts of implicit knowledge,” as tied to embedded cultural schemas of interpretation (Reckwitz 2012: 251). I advance this view by examining interpreting in Japan as an affective practice, carried out by interpreters who routinely act in accordance with a shared understanding of professional competence and normativity, and their affective interpretation of the forms of conduct necessary to perform interpreting satisfactorily (Warde and Southerton 2012, 116).

Interpreters' linguistic performances of affect mediation cannot overlook the discursive dimension. In her endeavour to link affect and discourse, Wetherell (2012,

2015) argues that “affective practices” are constituted by discursive representations and verbal articulations to produce embodied meaning-making in everyday life. Affect entangled in embodied action emerges through language at some point in a flow of activity, either in utterances associated with activities, or subsequently as individuals account linguistically for their actions (Wetherell 2015). This position enables us to consider how actions and discourses affect all participants in interpreted interaction, and how those affects stimulate other discursive mechanisms, through a process that Wetherell (2012, 7) describes as “affective-discursive loops.” It is this praxeological interconnection, one that sustains and elaborates affect and which in turn impacts individuals, that is at the center of my ethnographic study of Japanese interpreters.

### **Locating affect through an ethnography of Japanese interpreters**

This study is based on my ethnography of conference interpreting in Japan carried out in 2015-2016, when I immersed myself in the world of Japanese interpreters at work in a variety of high-stake settings in Tokyo and other cities, in jobs that entailed both simultaneous and consecutive interpretations between English and Japanese. I interviewed<sup>2</sup> and observed some 70 professional native Japanese conference interpreters, all urban, middle/upper-middle class, aged 36-84, following them at medical conferences, political events, and business negotiations. In this research, I used participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and visual-material methods (photographs of spaces, informants, objects, and a small collection of artefacts connected to the practice).

My fieldwork and participant positioning emphasized the value of linking affect theory to sensory literature. Attending to affect in fieldwork entails paying attention to the senses as a viable answer to the complexity of affect theory while producing an ethnographic and discursive account. By researching the interpreting practice, I thus

investigated its affective dimension, and how this impacts both interpreters and individuals who benefit from their services. I looked at the affective experiences of Japanese interpreters by integrating “classic” ethnography with a focus on multisensory and experiential research processes. Pink (2009) acknowledges that sensoriality is pivotal to understanding and representing individuals’ experiences while on fieldwork, similar to the “sensorial turn” in anthropology (Howes 1991, 2006) and in the sociology of the senses (Simmel 1950), leaving space to conceptualize affective understandings of social life (Thrift 2006; Ingold 2007, 2008). Ethnography allows the researcher to reflect on data gathering in terms of an exploration of practices, knowledge, values, culture, experiences, and social ties (Ingold 2000; Thrift 2004; Hindmarsh and Pilnick 2007). Integrating sensory ethnography into classic ethnography seemed also particularly compatible with my theoretical stance of practice theories (Nicolini 2012), which methodologically invite us to observe and record the bodily, skilful, and affective choreography that accomplishes practices.

As a conference interpreter, my positioning was both that of an insider researcher (Van Heugten 2004) and a practitioner,<sup>3</sup> which positively contributed to the sensory transfer between my informants, the practice, and myself. My positioning and skills allowed me to dig down into the process of affective data gathering and elucidation, attending to affect through my own sensorial processes. As I shared with informants the same professional skills of feeling with the world, I took part in the research process with both my intellectual faculties, and with my sensorial abilities (Strati 2003). I methodologically aligned myself to the affects of interpreting to try to overcome the dualism problematized in the interpreters’ supposed neutral role.

By contemporarily and reflexively attending to the senses, as a researcher I developed new understandings and paths of exploration of the practice of interpreting

(Howes 2006). I argue that the researcher's body, as an instrument of feeling with the world, feels affect in fieldwork through the process of affecting, being affected, and observing the workings of affect. My understanding of the practice was in tune and constantly augmented by my immersion among and within interactions with Japanese colleagues, which allowed me to get closer to the cultural implications of working as an interpreter in Japan. Therefore, I understood the Japanese context through the role of the senses, joining the situated, experiential, and lived nature of my informants' practices, and attuning my cultural values of the profession to those of the interpreters under study (see also Pink 2009). Particularly, drawing upon the anthropological tradition of long-term and deep participant observation, being an embedded participant in fieldwork became to me a practice which produced knowledge of, and exchanges on, affect through sensorial engagement. I experienced with my informants, in the booths for simultaneous interpretation (Figure 1), the heat, sweat, and anxiety of translating in real-time the Japanese speech of a member of the Cabinet Office to an audience of international journalists. I watched informants performing consecutive interpretation for businessmen, scholars and politicians, sometimes stumbling upon the rendition of Japanese linguistic terms with no cultural equivalent in English. I witnessed the heart pounding from being exposed to the judgment of a hundred-person audience or the fear of jeopardizing a business negotiation worth millions of dollars, or pleading on behalf of NGOs helping war refugees. The empirical examples that follow concentrate on the interpreters rather than the researcher, and are taken from my corpus of interviews conducted with interpreters reflecting on their experiences.

**Figure 1: Two Japanese interpreters at work in a booth for simultaneous interpretation (photograph by author)**

### **Locating affect in conference interpreting: From the Japanese field**

This section focuses on interpreters' embodied experience of meaning mediation. It emphasises the ways Japanese interpreters use their supposed "neutral" role not to reproduce the accepted professional discourse of interpreting, which states that interpreters must detach emotionally from the interpretation, the surroundings, and the parties involved, but rather to close the artificial division between reason and emotion. Notwithstanding their normative cloak of neutrality, interpreters produce, mediate, and feel affects that circulate through bodies – their own, and those of clients and listeners.

As emerges throughout my informants' narratives, interpreting was always an affective experience for them, even though it sometimes seemed tempered by their adherence to the neutrality norm. They mobilized their normative neutrality to manage the artificial division of reason and emotion, directing and using the presence of affects to their own advantage in ensuring a good communicative outcome. Interpreters in my sample discussed this ability as their expertise – the practical understanding of interpreting and its entanglement with teleo-affective and normative positioning. Informants conveyed their symbolic neutral positioning as an interplay of managing affect through a linguistic dimension, which also entailed considering the cultural specificities of the parties involved. Take the example of Tomoko, who conveyed the role of the interpreter as a neutral communication conduit by culturally embedding and associating it to the figure of the *itako*, spiritual mediums: <sup>4</sup>

You know, in Japan we say that the interpreters are *urakata*<sup>5</sup> or "people in the backstage." We don't come out on the stage, but prepare the stage where the principal actors, our clients and audiences, perform. However, I think that following this rule of

neutrality is not really the point. If both parties get the impression that they are talking to each other directly, that's good. But sometimes you have to change your position considering the cultural differences and the implications of each assignment. I try to put myself in the shoes of both parties, to understand their way of communicating, the emotions involved when I translate expressions into Japanese or English. I call myself a medium interpreter, as if I were an *itako*, with a spirit inside my body! (Tomoko, 36, female)

Letting the experience “possess” them was a mark of expertise for interpreters in my sample, who utilized affective skills of feeling with clients and in their cultural positioning. Particularly, interpreters articulated affect through the somatic experience of their speaking subjects, mobilizing their perceived neutrality to move effectively behind and beyond it. This was achieved by understanding the rational and emotional sides of the interaction together, and mediating these sides into a discursive dimension through the act of translation. As a consequence, as Tomoko’s account reveals, the affective embeddedness of interpreting as a social practice is entangled with specific socio-symbolic and cultural understandings typical of Japan. She linguistically equalled her “mediation” activities between the two parties and their cultures to those of the *itako*, in a manner that highlights how she could, as a representative of the interpreters’ affective skills, metaphorically be put into motion by other entities (Latour 2004).

The workings of Japanese interpreters open up crucial questions about the relation between affect and embodied meaning-making practices as “felt aliveness given in bodily capacities to act, engage and connect” (Halley and Clough 2007, 2), which cannot overlook the discursive dimension. The affective skills of interpreters were used in relation to others’ bodies and clients’ cultures, and were always teleo-affectively oriented to specific goals, ends, and affective states. These teleo-affective skills



revealed themselves as vehicles of “affective intensities” (Ringrose and Renold 2014) that were contingent, complex, and contextualised, conveyed by the linguistic renditions of the interpreters. As my informants expressed:

We depend not just on words, but on the whole context, the culture and the setting in which the speaker-audience encounter takes place, and on the emotions of the speakers and participants. (Rei, 39, female)

We convey the significance of emotions, of human relationships, through language. We are experts on culture, like anthropologists. We clarify cultural matters, including emotions conveyed by the speaker or by the speech, and we act as cultural mediators. (Mariko, 54, female)

An obvious entanglement for interpreters occurred routinely between embodied states and the semiotics of meaning-making (Wetherell 2015). Interpreters characterized their meaning-making processes as a matter of considering both the rational dimension (words, settings, clients) and the emotions to effectively facilitate communication and human relationships as well. By doing so, the interpreters in my sample attempted to overcome the distinction between emotion and reason in the professional discourse and normativity of interpreting, which appears misaligned with the reality of everyday life.

Interpreters’ awareness of their role in terms of reliance on expert affective skills of being in and feeling with the assignment at hand shows that my informants felt that bridging rationality and emotions in their interpretation was pivotal for the display of professional services. Many of my Japanese informants discussed interpreting as a “meaning industry,” and interpreters’ expertise as an investment into orchestrating affect, letting affect shape the interpreters, too:

You need to be able to catch the spirit to communicate this person's words to another person. It's like a meaning industry. There are always feelings when people communicate. We have to be an in-between to capture this. I always get very engaged, I enjoy it when I see that I can make people understand each other. There was an assignment where the head of this organization from Africa came, and talked about these children whose mothers and fathers had been killed in war. They were here in Japan to obtain funding. In these meetings, you have to convince through your interpretation that these people are in a severe situation and that they truly need money. For those cases you must focus more on the emotions to entice the listeners to give money to the speaker. You can't miss the human point. If you focus on emotional aspects, this doesn't mean that you lack accuracy and reason, it's just the way you choose to speak, to convey things, and this means that you will know what side of the matter to convey to make an impact. Incompetent interpreters can't do this. You have to be able to watch all these different things that go around you and...adjust yourself to the stimuli and to what people need...Sometimes we can't find the linguistic or cultural expression that would match the same level of emotion, but we try to do as much as we can to impact the audience. Because, at the end of the day, you can also be happier this way. You think about what happens beyond, because your interpretation affects somebody. (Michiko, 51, female)

Michiko's multi-layered narrative shows that interpreters like her are aware of affecting communication and listeners, as well as being aware that they themselves are affected. Her account conveys interpreters' capacity to move across their professional role, made of negotiated rules, habits, and skills, to protect themselves and users from negative reactions and to cause positive outcomes by using awareness of how much interpreters can move within their own and clients' interpreting culture to ensure expert service. Additionally, Michiko's account highlights that the circulation of affect is made

possible, in interpreted events, mainly through the linguistic dimension. Interpreters orchestrate the original discourse by choosing how to convey it, giving it what they consider to be the most appropriate emotional rendition into another language. It is through interpreters' linguistic choices that affect is "tamed" into a socio-linguistic and cultural realm, with interpreters deciding sometimes to privilege the emotional side of the speech over the rational, to push listeners to be moved and help with the speakers' requests. As such, interpreting into another language using affective skills becomes a way of "moving" the subject, and making it "feel."

Another commonly heard notion of affective skills among my informants was the concern for creating the proper atmosphere (*fun'iki*) between parties by reading, translating, and mediating feelings. During tense assignments, such as business negotiations, interpreters made efforts to create the proper atmosphere (literally, "assist the atmosphere," *fun'iki o jōsei suru*), thereby emotionally mediating the situation through language so that it becomes conducive to positive outcomes for the clients, and thus for the interpreter as well:

Sometimes the atmosphere is really tense in a business negotiation with a Japanese side and, let's say, an American side. You have negative emotions because X is not happy about Y and there are also cultural clashes. In the past few years, I have learned both how to protect myself and to act in a way that clarifies to people that you have to be there, but you're not the person speaking, and I do that by bending the rule of neutrality – I directly intervene as a third party to *fun'iki o jōsei suru*,<sup>6</sup> to "assist the atmosphere" to get to a positive outcome. Otherwise I would get into trouble because if one party is angry, by association they would be angry with me as well, and in the end you have two parties killing each other. (Haruna, 49, female)

When the circumstances are too tense and may have a negative impact on the event, the interpreter may directly intervene in the atmosphere. Haruna affected the atmosphere and the clients' emotions, which she equated to "anger," in order to strive for the success of the interaction. As Ahmed argues (2013, 175), anger has an epistemological function in shaping the atmosphere. It becomes delineated linguistically as an emotion by interpreters, who act upon it in order to not bring it as an object into the assignment. As described above, Haruna mediated the feeling in a linguistic way without returning it to the parties in its full affective force, but rather acting upon her neutrality – affecting the assignment – to avoid the circulation of negative feelings among clients, which would in the end be directed back to her. At the same time, Haruna felt affected by the situation, knowing that she could be recognized as the catalyst of what happened because of her bi-cultural mediation and her symbolic role as the person in the middle, which she avoided by bending the neutrality rule. Thus, being an interpreter in Japan has much to do with embodied meaning-making (Wetherell 2012), as well as with mediating and affecting the interpreter's professional practice and its institutionalised features.

### **The politics of interpreting affect: Bridging the reason/emotion split in linguistic acts**

A closer reading of the everyday entanglements of interpreting shows that the Japanese interpreters in my ethnography are immersed in acts that mediate the political nature of the reason-emotion split. Accounting for the "cultural politics of emotions," Ahmed argues that emotionality about subjects and collectives is clearly dependent on power relations (2013, 4). Ahmed's view is echoed by practice theory's perspective on power dynamics as distributing power and teleo-affective value among groups (Nicolini 2012, 6; Ortner 1984). Practitioners competently oriented in terms of affective skills have the

capacity to exercise and manage power as a “capacity to act with effect” (Watson 2017, 171).

The role of interpreters in attending to the politics of affect emerged forcefully in the narratives of a small group of informants “working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds” (Ahmed 2013, 191). These interpreters have been collaborating since 2011 with the Japanese government and various international scientific organizations to meet Fukushima’s residents’ needs after the nuclear plant disaster.<sup>7</sup> In the accounts that follow, affect was entangled with the material (the contaminated land), the social (as produced within relations with individuals involved), and the discursive (interpreters’ linguistic mediation), but here I am especially concerned with the political dimension as mediated by interpreters through their own normatively “disengaged” positioning. The excerpt below shows that interpreters need to experience the affective impact of the event being discussed in order to adequately affect the individuals involved – acting with power within the limits of the interpreting practice. Interpreters negotiated power by using their skills to untangle the political dimension of affect to help residents. This dimension was particularly difficult for the interpreters to manage, as they were negotiating the re-union of emotions and reason in their discursive renditions vis-à-vis their internalized normative positioning as neutral conduits:

I do a lot of nuclear-power-related meetings with the International Radiological Society because of the accident that occurred in Fukushima. The speakers are residents of Fukushima prefecture, from the affected zones. These meetings started from the winter of 2011 until today. and cover...how to help the residents in those affected areas; especially in the early days, these residents were given the opportunity to speak about...their own experiences and emotions. To listen to their voices: how they were

affected, how their farmland had been contaminated... People would always be like...full of criticism, towards nuclear power and all these things that the government had done to them. When they speak...of being apart from their kids sent to their grandparents, or the husband and wife being separated for job relocation...they are desperate. They burst into tears, always. They shout at those elected people who they feel should take care of them... From an interpreting perspective, this is very challenging. This doesn't mean that we have to be ready to cry with them, but you need to empathize with them, while being calm and digesting all their words. It is difficult to find the [proper] linguistic nuance, and the best attitude for us. The emotional side, you cannot really find anywhere, how to do it; I could easily just shut it off. But interpreters have to understand other people's feelings to convey them in another language. It's not just words, it's the feeling, the passion, the emotions. (Kiriko, 49, female)

Kiriko's experience shows how interpreters are affected by the interpreting situation – hence, they cannot be “neutral,” as in the codes of ethics which state that emotional detachment is the ethical position they should take. In fact, interpreters such as Kiriko struggled to find a balanced position, because they were physically, psychologically, and emotionally affected by residents' testimony. However, they still needed to maintain a more detached attitude in order to fairly represent the residents' political stances in another language. The complexity, in this case, lay in being able to make a linguistic equivalence of the affected individuals' outer display of emotion, and to correctly convey it. The contingent nature of affect here as revealing the cultural politics of emotions in the post-nuclear scenario reinforces the position of interpreters as engaged in a form of cognitive and emotional battling of affect through oral translations.

The case of Japanese interpreters assisting individuals who are suffering from the post-disaster governmental impasse can be seen as an attempt to debunk the long-

standing Western assumption that emotion is incompatible with reason, and that reason is superior to emotion (Lutz 1986). This dualistic hierarchy, though advanced in the discourse of the interpreting profession, was nonetheless erased by interpreters, who instead saw the intensity of desperation in Fukushima's testifying residents and reshaped it through their affective skills. Interpreters' affective skills served to re-address imbalances in the presentation of individuals affected by the nuclear disaster, who seemed to embody, in public perception, the unreasonableness of emotions:

Following the Fukushima accident, I was assigned to do interpretation concerning the Fukushima Daichi nuclear power plant...for the people who worked there, the engineers, the media representatives, the government, and the international aid associations experts. They all have very complex emotions about the situation. I work with them to help them understand the situation of Fukushima Daichi. I feel I want to be part of conveying the words and emotions to understand the situation. You interpret for people affected by the...radiation of the accident, seeing the destruction, even seeing the nuclear reactor. It's heart-breaking because you see people suffering because of the accident, because of the affected areas, like agriculture and farming, that they had lost. We give voice to their emotions, to their desperation....They have nothing but problems, and the government obscured it, saying these people are crazy, over-emotional, don't want to collaborate, don't want to accept alternative offers. I want to help portray these people fairly. (Naoko, 74, female)

Naoko's narrative captures not only the interconnection between the affected environment and affect on the emotions of the local population, but also the interpreters' role in re-framing such emotions. The use of powerful terms – “desperation” and “destruction” – to linguistically convey the meaning of residents' emotions are used by interpreters to advance “restorative justice” (Ahmed 2013, 197).

Through their linguistic restoration, interpreters offered victims the chance to impact the situation with their feelings, and offered institutions the chance to reconsider their aid role towards the victims, both matters of affectivity.

The politics of reparation through the management of unbalanced power relations was understood by the vast majority of interpreters in my sample. Naoko pointed again to the role of redressing the split of emotion/reason in interpreters' professional practice when operating in another affectively and politically charged setting:

I work for the President of the XXX Foundation and he is very much involved in charity initiatives, helping stopping the spread of leprosy, and providing food to those in need because of poverty, war, or environmental catastrophe. It's very humanitarian work. I enjoy it because you come into contact with people and their emotions, as a form of empathy. I often go to India because the WHO is curing leprosy-affected people. The most touching thing is going to the field, and working with the WHO staff who provide medication, while I help them communicate. To speak on behalf of these people through my interpreting, ensuring their human rights—I do like helping with my job, excavating opportunities for these people, who are afraid because they are sick, looked down upon, discriminated against. (Naoko, 74, female)<sup>8</sup>

Attuning oneself professionally to the affectivity of each job and the human beings involved is pivotal to both affect the users, and to being positively affected in return. In these cases, interpreters who make sense of the politics of affect give linguistic voice to emotions and bodies affected by natural and human disasters. By doing so, interpreters channel emotions as social, relational and rational; they participate in “a form of world-making” that enables parties to find meaning. As such, interpreters are not alienated professionals, but are enmeshed into the politics of affect, helping to linguistically



manage emotions as a pervasive social force that helps to constitute both individual and collective ways of being, feeling, and acting in the global realm.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have reconsidered the reason/emotion split set forth within the interpreting profession, which promotes the role of interpreters as disengaged beings, dialoguing with affect theory and practice theory through a reading of affect and teleo-affectivity as embedded within social and cultural practices. These praxeological lenses allow us to re-connect the dualistic split present in the interpreting profession between cognitive and emotional processes by linking affect to practical, cultural and discursive schemas of knowledgeable interpretation.

In my sensory ethnography of interpreters in Japan, I have shown that the interpreting practice – as all practices – is contingent on the intermeshing of knowledge, affectivity, and normativity, with interpreters using their professional skills to affect communication in practice-specific ways, and in turn affecting others and being affected. This became explicit through the Japanese interpreters' negotiation of their habituated role as “neutral” communication experts. Through a balance of their normative role, contingent to the situation and the individuals involved, these interpreters took advantage of forms of appropriate conduct necessary to perform interpreting satisfactorily by managing the impact of affect in cultural-linguistic interventions through practices and skills of feeling with the world. Here, I particularly showed that the case of Japanese interpreters debunks the long-standing Western consideration, as reproduced in interpreting practice, that emotion and reason are incompatible, and the attempt to erase cultural situatedness from affective experiences. This dimension was acutely visible when interpreters addressed the political aspects of affect through their re-balancing of power relations within interactions carried out in

post-disaster scenarios. Interpreters produced embodied meaning-making (Wetherell 2012) by simultaneously accounting for emotions and reason as an opportunity to affect and be affected, balanced in accordance with the rules of the practice and with the expert negotiation of their symbolic role as affect in-betweeners.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Currently, research on affect also resonates with broader emphases on the intertwining of the material, the social, the biological, and the cultural, exploring processes of their joint articulation (Latour 2004). This has brought about a new focus on affect and its relationality with spaces and objects (Ingold 2007, 2008), the environment and atmospheres (Mouriceau 2016), and buildings (Gherardi 2017a, b). These elements act as generators, bearers, and mediators of affect or as structures that surround people and affect their senses.

<sup>2</sup> The interviews reported here were conducted predominantly in English. They are transcribed as they were spoken in English.

<sup>3</sup> This role is defined as being a “practisearcher” (Gile 1994) and is very common in translation and interpreting studies research.

<sup>4</sup> *Itako* (Saito 2007) are blind female spiritual mediums in Japan, whose activities include performing rituals tied to communication with the dead.

<sup>5</sup> *Urakata* literally means “person behind” and can be used to indicate someone working behind-the-scenes, a scene-shifter.

<sup>6</sup> The informant used the Japanese expression in the original interview conducted in English.

<sup>7</sup> Fukushima Prefecture suffered in 2011 from the nuclear disaster accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant of Ōkuma and Futaba, initially generated by the *tsunami* which followed the Tōhoku earthquake.

8            This informant worked with a team of interpreters who translated from the local language or dialect into English, with the interpreter intervening to convey the message into and from Japanese through their “relayed” interpretation. However, some of the affected parties, as Naoko clarified in her interview, also spoke some English.

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