Redrawing the Panorama of Interpreting Theory: A Review on "Theorising Interpreting Studies"

Gao Wangqi

Postgraduate Student, School of Interpreting & Translation Studies, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, CHINA.

Corresponding Author: gaowangqi514@163.com

ABSTRACT

Theorising Interpreting Studies addresses the long-standing fragmentation and lack of systematic theoretical frameworks in Chinese interpreting research by constructing a multi-dimensional epistemology that integrates micro-level cognitive processing, meso-level communicative coordination, and macro-level socio-cultural perspectives. Wang Binhua proposes seven theoretical modules, encompassing interpreting as a bilingual conversion process, a cognitive operation, an information-processing mechanism, a discourse comprehension and production activity, interpersonal and cross-cultural communication behavior, and professional competence. The book develops multi-level and multimodal research pathways, connecting empirical investigation with theoretical analysis, and provides structured frameworks for community interpreting, interpreter roles, ethical norms, historical research, and interdisciplinary development. A distinctive feature of the work is its critical engagement with classical Western theories, including the Paris School's Interpretive Theory and cognitive load models, while simultaneously integrating Chinese-specific practices, such as dialect and minority-language interpreting, thereby achieving a localized yet globally informed theoretical synthesis. The book emphasizes interpreting as a complex cognitive–informational–social activity and demonstrates methodological rigor through the combination of literature review, conceptual analysis, and empirical modeling. Key contributions include overcoming theoretical fragmentation, fostering cross-cultural academic dialogue, and offering practical guidance for scholars and graduate students. While minor gaps remain in aligning micro-level theoretical modules and balancing descriptive exposition with critical evaluation, the work provides a comprehensive reference for the advancement of interpreting theory, clarifies developmental trajectories, and suggests research pathways for future interdisciplinary exploration, cross-cultural dialogue, and the integration of local practices into global scholarly discourse. This book thus represents a milestone in consolidating empirical and theoretical research in interpreting studies and offers a systematic foundation for the continued development of the discipline.

Keywords- Interpreting Studies, Multi-dimensional Epistemology, Interdisciplinary Research, Localized Theoretical Innovation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since 1958, when scholars Tang Sheng and Zhou Jueliang published China's first paper on interpreting studies in Western Languages, the field of interpreting research in China has undergone more than sixty years of development, achieving significant progress both in academic accumulation and practical exploration. Particularly in the area of empirical research, research paradigms have become increasingly diversified, and methodologies and techniques have moved steadily toward scientific rigor and standardization (Hong & Chen, 2021). Regrettably, theoretical research in interpreting has long remained in a "scattered" state, lacking a systematic theoretical framework. This has made it difficult to provide structured guidance for empirical studies and has become a key bottleneck limiting the field's advancement to higher levels. *Theorising Interpreting Studies*, authored by Professor Wang Binhua and published in 2019 by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, is an important work addressing this issue. Although several years have passed since its publication, the

book integrates, reflects upon, and synthesizes existing interpreting theories. While engaging with international discourse in interpreting studies, it incorporates a distinctive Chinese research perspective and an interdisciplinary vision. The book aims to build upon existing empirical research to strengthen the systematic construction and exposition of interpreting theory, responding to the long-standing problem of theoretical fragmentation in the field. It provides an important reference for interpreting scholars seeking to comprehensively grasp the representative theoretical achievements and developmental trajectory of interpreting research.

II.   AN OVERVIEW OF CONTENT

The book consists of six chapters, structured around three core conceptual systems, clearly outlining the development trajectory and future directions of interpreting studies: Chapter 1, grounded in the ontological attributes of interpreting, provides an in-depth analysis and constructs a multi-dimensional epistemological framework for interpreting research. It further identifies the field's core research topics and systematic theoretical framework, serving as the logical foundation and central chapter of the entire work. Chapters 2 to 5, guided by this multi-dimensional epistemology, progressively explore topics at the micro, meso, and macro levels. These chapters not only elaborate the research connotations at each level but also present representative scholarly achievements and research progress across different dimensions. Chapter 6 takes an international perspective, drawing extensively on the latest Western research paradigms and theoretical contributions from related disciplines. From an interdisciplinary integration viewpoint, it offers a forward-looking exploration of the theoretical development path of interpreting studies, ultimately distilling a comprehensive and instructive overall framework for the field.

Chapter 1 focuses on the construction of a multi-dimensional epistemology for interpreting studies and the discipline's developmental trajectory. The author begins with a systematic review of the diverse forms and classification systems of interpreting, clarifying its categorization across key dimensions such as usage context, communication medium, and working mode, thereby providing readers with a foundational understanding of interpreting research. Building on this, the chapter uses conceptual definitions and analyses of distinguishing features of interpreting, contrasting them with translation, to highlight the discipline's uniqueness. Specifically, the core distinguishing features of interpreting are identified as fourfold:

1. The immediacy of the interpreting process;
2. Singular delivery of the source and target discourses;
3. Co-presence of all participants;
4. Orality of the source and target discourses.

Notably, in his latest work, the author further expands this feature system by adding two dimensions: multitasking in cognitive processes and multimodal information processing in interpreting (Wang, 2025). These additions deepen the understanding of interpreting's cognitive processing and discourse characteristics, enriching the interpretation of its ontological essence. Based on this foundation, the author attempts to construct a multi-dimensional epistemology of interpreting studies, encompassing seven core modules: interpreting as a "bilingual conversion process," a "cognitive operation and processing process," an "information processing process," a "discourse comprehension and production process," an "interpersonal interaction and cross-cultural communication behavior," and "professional skills and competence." These seven modules are further organized into micro-, meso-, and macro-level analytical perspectives, integrated with the aforementioned distinguishing features, helping readers clarify the core objects of interpreting research and establish a solid epistemological foundation. Building on this, the chapter develops theoretical constructions across five levels. In outlining the discipline's development, the author systematically reviews key stages and representative scholarly achievements from both international and domestic perspectives, clearly tracing the evolution of interpreting studies from its inception to its gradual establishment as an independent discipline. Finally, based on the epistemological framework established earlier, the author synthesizes and integrates existing research findings to provide a panoramic understanding of the current field of interpreting studies.

Chapter 2 explores theories of real-time bilingual cognitive processing in interpreting. From the Paris School's Interpretive Theory to cognitive load model hypotheses, and further to comprehensive models of the interpreting process that incorporate multiple cognitive processing stages, the author introduces the cognitive operations and processing mechanisms of interpreting in a progressively in-depth manner. The chapter begins with the "triangular model" of Interpretive Theory, which explains the basic procedures and key concepts of the interpreting process by proposing three stages—comprehension, deverbalization, and reformulation. Between comprehension and expression lies a stage in which meaning is detached from its linguistic shell. The author then addresses the controversies provoked by this theory, such as its limited empirical testability and the vagueness of its key concepts, before presenting his own view: intuitive and introspective theoretical reasoning and scientifically grounded empirical validation represent two complementary research paradigms, both of which are indispensable. Drawing on the core tenets of Interpretive Theory, the author raises five major theoretical questions that probe the complexity of the interpreting process. This not only exposes the theory's limitations but also paves the way for the subsequent introduction of research approaches from experimental and cognitive psychology.

Gile's cognitive load formula and effort model hypotheses reveal the multitask nature of interpreting, while Gerver and Moser-Mercer propose two comprehensive models of interpreting cognitive processing that examine its complex procedural stages. Finally, scholars both in China and abroad have successively investigated the bilingual transfer and processing mechanisms involved in interpreting. In the concluding section, the author affirms the value of modeling research on cognitive processing in interpreting, while cautioning that empirically oriented model construction must take ecological validity into account. On this basis, he acknowledges the theoretical significance of descriptive models and emphasizes that, given the complexity of interpreting, no single model should be casually claimed to possess universal applicability.

In Chapter 3, the author shifts the focus from cognitive processing in interpreting to real-time bilingual information processing, placing greater emphasis on the transformation process and outcomes of information from the source language to the target language. The chapter primarily examines information-processing mechanisms, post-processing product evaluation, strategy selection and operational norms during processing, and, on this basis, constructs a multi-level, multimodal research framework for bilingual information processing in interpreting. First, the Soviet school represented by Chernov conducts a specialized investigation into information-processing mechanisms in simultaneous interpreting, revealing that SI is an inferential process based on probabilistic prediction. The key lies in interpreters' concentration on newly introduced information in the source-language output, while target-language production likewise follows a predictive synthesis mechanism. Building on this foundation, scholars both in China and abroad have carried out more detailed and in-depth explorations of information-processing mechanisms in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, summarizing two types of information condensation in interpreting, mechanisms of discourse information compression, the cognitive-psychological processes underlying information restructuring, as well as operational methods and regularities of information processing in SI. Research on interpreting product evaluation has shifted from earlier explorations of prescriptive assessment criteria to investigations of descriptive evaluation parameters. This line of research reveals the dynamic and complex nature of interpreting assessment, as well as the gap between the idealized state of interpreting output and its actual realization. The latter involves not only verbal information but also multiple variables such as on-site processing conditions, working environments, and language-pair differences. The author then examines interpreting strategy research under conditions of source–target information asymmetry, pointing out that strategies are employed to enable interpreters to successfully accomplish their tasks. The use of such strategies follows certain principles, including the maximization of information recovery, minimization of interference, maximization of communicative effect, and the principle of least effort. Finally, taking interpreting discourse as a point of departure, the author explores its multimodal characteristics by integrating bilingual information-processing mechanisms, strategies, and operational norms, and proposes a multi-level, multimodal research pathway for bilingual information processing in interpreting. Specifically, the author notes that both source and target texts in interpreting constitute three-dimensional discourse involving auditory and visual perception, composed of linguistic, paralinguistic, and non-verbal information. Existing research has largely focused on the linguistic features and delivery characteristics of source-language information, while the latter two dimensions have received comparatively limited attention. With ongoing technological advances, the author calls for strengthened investigation into the paralinguistic and non-verbal features of interpreting discourse and argues for the necessity of examining all three dimensions as an integrated whole through cross-validation.

Chapter 4 takes community interpreting as its primary object of inquiry and examines the theory of communicative mediation and coordination in interpreting. The author begins with a review of existing research on community interpreting, paying particular attention to the proceedings of the Critical Link community interpreting conferences. From this review, the author observes a steady improvement in the quality of the studies, with much research drawing on concepts and methods from sociolinguistics, sociology, and discourse analysis. However, the main research threads remain insufficiently clear, and relevant theoretical frameworks have yet to be fully developed. Against this backdrop, the author seeks to explore research paradigms and frameworks for a theory of communicative mediation and coordination in interpreting. By synthesizing previous scholarship, three perspectives are identified: (1) a discourse-interaction coordination perspective; (2) a communicative-interaction coordination perspective; and (3) a power and cross-cultural coordination perspective. These perspectives allow for successive examination of discourse management in interpreting, participation frameworks in interpreted events, and issues of power, face, and cross-cultural coordination in interpreting activities. The author then discusses communicative mediation and coordination in judicial and medical settings, and introduces related research on sign language interpreting. These discussions reveal that interpreters in different settings are far from being neutral "conduits" or mere "echoers" of speech; rather, they play an important coordinating role in communicative interaction. In the concluding section, the author calls for greater attention to community interpreting in courts, hospitals, and other public service institutions, where interpreters mediate among multiple stakeholders and engage in intensive interaction, offering considerable potential for expanding the depth and breadth of related research. The author also emphasizes the need to examine community interpreting across different sociocultural contexts. At the level of data analysis, relevant studies—particularly those on sign language interpreting—can adopt the multimodal analytical approaches outlined in Chapter 3, conducting comprehensive analyses across linguistic, paralinguistic, and non-verbal dimensions.

Chapter 5 initiates an inquiry into interpreting as a socio-cultural activity from a macro-level perspective, shifting the research focus to the broader contextual and external factors shaping interpreting practice. Its core content encompasses

four major areas: interpreter role and ethics research, interpreting norms research, macro-level socio-cultural perspectives, and interpreting history studies. First, through a systematic review of early research on interpreter roles, the author identifies a central tension: the definition of the interpreter's role in professional codes of conduct does not fully align with interpreters' actual behavior in real interpreting settings. This discrepancy reveals the multifaceted and complex nature of interpreter roles. Such complexity often places interpreters in ethical dilemmas in practice, which Chesterman categorizes into five models: (1) ethics of representation, (2) ethics of service, (3) ethics of communication, (4) norm-oriented ethics, and (5) ethics of commitment. The author then clarifies the theoretical origins of interpreting norms research by tracing the concept of "translation norms" in translation studies, noting that its core tasks involve two dimensions: "describing phenomena" and "establishing regularities." The underlying logic is to situate interpreting activities within specific socio-cultural contexts for in-depth analysis. With regard to interpreting norms research, the author points out limitations in earlier studies, which often attributed deviations between the source and target texts solely to interpreters' cognitive overload, while overlooking interpreters' strategic choices made to optimize communicative effectiveness. In response, the author constructs a descriptive framework for interpreting norms research, proposing three key perspectives: norms governing source–target language relations, target-language communicative norms, and professional ethical norms. Next, the author reviews the theoretical development of the "socio-cultural perspective" in interpreting studies, emphasizing the necessity of introducing sociological concepts and research methods to broaden the field's analytical scope. The author notes that existing research has already made productive attempts in this direction, such as applying Bourdieu's core concepts—field, capital, and habitus—to analyze the nature of interpreting activities, or employing systemic functional grammar from sociolinguistics as an analytical tool for fine-grained examination of specific interpreted discourse practices. Finally, the author surveys the core domains of interpreting history research, including the history of the interpreting profession, the history of interpreting in major events, and individual interpreter histories. Particular emphasis is placed on the sociological perspective in interpreting historiography, which enables a deeper understanding of the social construction of interpreter roles, power dynamics within interpreting activities, and other underlying socio-cultural factors that shape interpreters' behavioral choices.

In Chapter 6, the author approaches interpreting studies from the perspective of disciplinary development and systematically explores pathways for the field's academic construction. Drawing on cutting-edge Western research in interpreting studies and core approaches in translation studies, the author develops an overarching framework for the theoretical development of the discipline from an interdisciplinary perspective. At present, the field is characterized by steadily improving journal article quality, increasingly refined theoretical and methodological systems, the continued accumulation of pedagogical achievements, and notable progress in corpus-based interpreting research, making the expansion of research pathways an inevitable trend. The author first focuses on linguistics-oriented research pathways, proposing that discourse analysis and functionalist approaches can be employed to investigate interpreting discourse and interpreting strategies across different settings. Research on linguistic features of interpreting concentrates on shared characteristics of interpreted language; the author recommends discourse analysis and text typology as core analytical tools. Studies of interpreting style, by contrast, address individual variation and may reveal key dimensions of stylistic differences through comparative research between novice and professional interpreters, as well as between native and non-native interpreters. With respect to cultural research pathways, the author distinguishes three main approaches: critical discourse analysis, gender studies, and postcolonial studies. He notes at the end of the chapter that cultural approaches remain exploratory both domestically and internationally, containing a wealth of promising topics yet to be fully investigated. In the sociological research pathway, scholars have widely adopted Bourdieu's theoretical framework, analyzing interpreting activities through the interrelated dimensions of capital, field, and habitus, thereby effectively broadening the analytical horizon of the discipline. The historical research pathway takes specific historical periods, major historical events, key historical figures, and thematic histories as its primary objects of inquiry. Historical data may be obtained through interviews with participants and interpreters involved in modern and contemporary history, as well as through sources such as diplomatic histories and biographies, from which relevant traces of interpreting activities and interpreters can be reconstructed. Finally, based on a pluralistic epistemological perspective on interpreting, the author constructs a comprehensive research framework characterized by multiple perspectives, levels, and pathways. This framework not only responds to the five core issues identified in Chapter 1 by clearly aligning each issue with corresponding methodological approaches, but also employs the metaphor of "concentric circles" to delineate two major research trends: "inward exploration" and "outward exploration." The author advocates cross-validation among findings derived from different research pathways to enhance the depth and robustness of research conclusions. Addressing four key challenges inherent in interdisciplinary research, the author offers targeted insights, such as proposing the use of ethnomethodology to collect linguistic and paralinguistic data in interpreting. He further notes significant differences between Chinese and Western interpreting practices, arguing that China's rich experience in dialect interpreting and minority-language interpreting can provide valuable supplements to Western research on community interpreting. In the concluding remarks, the author emphasizes that mature machine interpreting can only assist interpreters at the micro level—such as in real-time bilingual cognitive processing and bilingual information transfer. While automatic speech recognition (ASR) technologies may help reduce cognitive load, from meso-level and macro socio-cultural perspectives, the "emotional intelligence" of human interpreters remains irreplaceable.

III.   ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

This book is marked by several distinctive academic features, which are mainly reflected in the following three aspects.

First, a visionary and multi-perspective construction of the theoretical framework. Grounded in definitions of interpreting and its distinguishing features, the book integrates micro-level cognitive, meso-level communicative, and macro-level socio-cultural perspectives to form a coherent and comprehensive system of a "multi-dimensional epistemology of interpreting." This framework overcomes the fragmentation that has long characterized interpreting research—such as dispersed theoretical perspectives, disconnected analytical levels, and limited dialogue among research findings—and clearly traces the discipline's evolutionary trajectory from its formative stage to its establishment as an independent field. By offering a panoramic integration and structured synthesis of existing scholarship, the book combines academic rigor with pedagogical accessibility. Its lucid and systematic exposition not only provides experienced scholars with a holistic view of the field, but also helps newcomers quickly construct a theoretical framework and accurately grasp the core threads and developmental directions of interpreting studies.

Second, mutual learning between Chinese and international scholarship, deepening academic dialogue. For a long time, domestic research has often faced the challenge of adapting Western theories to local practice. Existing Western interpreting theories remain limited in guiding interpreting practice in China, where "composite bilinguals" with uneven working-language proficiency constitute the main practitioner group (Zhang & Liu, 2021). Consequently, there is an urgent need to develop interpreting theories with distinct Chinese characteristics. Rather than serving as a purely introductory survey of Western theories, this book represents an integrative scholarly endeavor that synthesizes classical Western theories with indigenous research achievements in Chinese interpreting studies. It systematically reviews and critically evaluates seminal Western theories—such as the Paris School's Interpretive Theory and cognitive load models—while simultaneously grounding its analysis in the unique context of Chinese interpreting practice. By exploring the research value of local scenarios such as dialect interpreting and minority-language interpreting, and incorporating these regionally and culturally embedded practices into its theoretical framework, the book advances a series of innovative insights. In doing so, it not only offers new approaches to addressing the "contextual misfit" of Western theories in Chinese settings, but also provides localized theoretical reference points that help fill gaps in Western community interpreting research regarding multilingual and multicultural interactional contexts.

Finally, comprehensive reviews combined with intellectual depth and original insight. The book's literature reviews go beyond the mere accumulation of prior findings. On the basis of panoramic mapping, the author consistently employs critical thinking to challenge established assumptions. For instance, in response to the long-standing tendency in interpreting norms research to prioritize source-language equivalence over communicative effectiveness, the author creatively proposes a descriptive and evaluative framework encompassing norms governing source–target language relations, target-language communicative norms, and professional ethical norms. The author also offers a rigorous reassessment of the Paris School's "triangular model" of Interpretive Theory, acknowledging its foundational contributions to research on cognitive processing mechanisms and interpreter training, while precisely identifying its limitations, such as the insufficient empirical grounding of the concept of deverbalization. This approach exemplifies a critical appropriation of Western theories rather than unreflective adoption. It is particularly worth noting that for graduate students specializing in interpreting, the book's mode of critical review serves as a powerful methodological model, offering concrete guidance for cultivating the essential research competence of critically evaluating scholarly work.

IV.   LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, on the basis of a systematic review of previous scholarship, the book integrates a wide range of theoretical frameworks and, from an interdisciplinary perspective, proposes a comprehensive framework for interpreting studies that encompasses multiple perspectives, levels, and research pathways. This contribution is of significant value for the further development and consolidation of interpreting theory. Nevertheless, upon closer examination, there remain areas that could be refined.

First, there are minor gaps in the logical alignment of the presentation of the core theoretical framework. In Chapter 1, the book clearly identifies the "processes of discourse comprehension and production" as one of the core components of the micro-level perspective within the multi-dimensional epistemology of interpreting. This component would be expected to function as an independent dimension supporting micro-level theoretical construction. However, in the subsequent five layers of theoretical development, this component is not elaborated on separately, but is instead subsumed under the chapter on "real-time bilingual information processing in interpreting." While such categorization highlights the close relationship between discourse processes and information processing, the correspondence between the core epistemological framework and the later theoretical exposition is not entirely precise. This misalignment may cause some confusion for readers in understanding the internal logic of the micro-level perspective. Moreover, the partial mismatch between the framework's categorical divisions and the subsequent content development may weaken the rigor and integrity of the micro-level system

within the "multi-dimensional epistemology of interpreting." It risks blurring the theoretical boundaries of the core components at the micro level, making it difficult to clearly delineate the independent theoretical value and complementary relationship between "discourse comprehension and production processes" and "real-time bilingual information processing." Such ambiguity may, in turn, hinder further refinement and wider academic dissemination of the theoretical system.

Second, the balance between "description" and "evaluation" is somewhat uneven. The book provides exceptionally detailed accounts of the origins and development of various theories. However, in comparison with the extensive descriptive review, the space devoted to targeted critical evaluation is relatively limited. For example, in introducing the Critical Link research on community interpreting, the book devotes considerable space to outlining the key arguments presented in the conference proceedings, while offering comparatively brief critical analysis of their scholarly value and limitations. Such concise critical commentary may be insufficient to fully uncover the internal constraints and developmental potential of existing theoretical contributions, and thus may fall short of providing a clear problem-oriented impetus for theoretical innovation in interpreting studies. Although these issues do not detract from the book's core academic contributions, addressing them could further enhance the rigor and critical depth of its theoretical presentation.

Compared with the inductive approach commonly adopted in previous literature reviews—where scholars first collect a broad range of studies and then summarize the characteristics and shortcomings of a field using visualization or qualitative analysis tools—this book employs a deductive research path. It first constructs a clear theoretical and analytical framework, and then systematically examines existing research in light of that framework. The advantage of this approach lies in its strong theoretical orientation and internal logical coherence, enabling the review to move beyond mere descriptive cataloguing of the literature.

REFERENCES

[1]   Hong, S., & Chen, J. (2021). Empirical research on interpreting between Chinese and Western contexts: Review and prospects. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 42(1).
[2]   Wang, B. (2025). *New orientations in interpreting studies and interpreter education: Information processing, meaning mediation and language-pair specificity.* New York and London: Routledge.
[3]   Zhang, W., & Liu, Y. (2021). Comparative analysis of the latest progress in domestic and international interpreting studies: A bibliometric study based on CiteSpace (2015–2019). *Foreign Languages (Journal of Shanghai International Studies University)*, 44(2).