

Vargas-Urpi, M. (2017). Speak English or What? Codeswitching and Interpreter Use in New York City Courts (2015). *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 27, 223-225.

<https://doi.org/10.26034/cm.jostrans.2017.269>

This article is publish under a *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International* (CC BY):

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



© Mireia Vargas-Urpi, 2017

**Angermeyer, Philipp Sebastian (2015). *Speak English or What? Codeswitching and Interpreter Use in New York City Courts*. Series: Oxford Studies in Language and Law. New York: Oxford University Press, 248 pp, £51.00. ISBN 9780199337569.**

Court interpreting has become very fashionable in Translation and Interpreting Studies<sup>1</sup>. While most research in this area has been based on questionnaires, interviews and case studies, other studies have worked from corpora that are often “either simulated —and thus cannot claim to describe real life situations—, or relatively small samples — and thus cannot be used to extrapolate convincing results or claim to be significant from the point of view of research methodology” (Orozco-Jutorán forthcoming). The research which Philipp S. Angermeyer offers in *Speak English or What? Codeswitching and Interpreter Use in New York City Courts* is a clear exception to this trend: the author observed over 200 court proceedings, and tape-recorded and transcribed 60 hearings from small claims courts in New York City. The extensive ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by the author must be praised, especially considering the fact that the corpus also includes various language combinations with English, namely Spanish, Haitian Creole, Russian and Polish. Given the fusion of sound research and academic rigor behind this book, it has all the potential of becoming an essential reference in this field.

However, this book goes beyond court interpreting *per se*, spotlighting other topics that have been under-researched to date, such as codeswitching in interpreted interactions. For this, Angermeyer adopts a multidisciplinary approach combining theories from translation and interpreting studies, sociolinguistics, discourse studies, and forensic linguistics. The literature reviewed and discussed by the author is highly relevant for the topics under study, and could prove extremely valuable for any reader undertaking research in similar topics.

After an introductory chapter (“Indexicalities of language choice in small claims court”), the main body is organised as follows. Chapter 2, “Challenging claims: Immigrants in small claims court”, provides a detailed description of the context where the fieldwork was conducted. It explains the rationale and the dynamics of small claims courts —particularly useful for non-U.S. readers unacquainted with this kind of institution— with data about the languages interpreted in New York small claims courts and the types of disputes they handle. Chapter 3, “‘I’ve heard your story:’ How arbitrators decide,” focuses on arbitrators and how they conduct these kinds of hearings that place so much importance on the litigants’ narratives and, therefore, pose special challenges to speakers of languages other than English (LOTE).

Chapters 4 (“Only translating? The role of the interpreter”) and 5

("Testifying in another language: What's lost in translation") are certainly the most interesting from the perspective of Translation and Interpreting Studies. In chapter 4, after a brief description of the working conditions and formal training of the court interpreters of his corpus, Angermeyer analyses various examples of how interpreters manage their role. He questions the notion of "direct translation" (as opposed to the use of the reported speech) using statistical data from his corpus and specific extracts of transcribed hearings. His analysis is in fact a major contribution to the study of roles and styles, proposing new ideas such as "replaying" and "displaying" interpreting modes as well as motives behind deictic shifts. One of his conclusions is particularly striking: the need to empower interpreters to use their own voice as participants in interactions to avoid misunderstanding. In chapter 5, the author compares how LOTE-speaking litigants communicate by means of consecutive interpreting, the use of an L2 language and simultaneous interpreting. In this extremely stimulating discussion, he demonstrates that the distribution of interpreting modes results in a power imbalance in the courtroom that always puts the LOTE-speaking litigant at a disadvantage.

Chapter 6 sheds light onto a topic that has been sorely overlooked in dialogue interpreting research: "Codeswitching in the courtroom." What happens when a person who is communicating by means of an interpreter mixes two languages? Given that immigration is stabilising in Europe and many interpreting services users have varying degrees of knowledge of official languages, this chapter is particularly pertinent and a starting point for prospective studies on the same topic.

Finally, chapter 7, "Language ideology and legal outcomes," presents the conclusions of this comprehensive study. Angermeyer's discussion and reflections challenge some of the fundamentals of court interpreting, with solid and convincing arguments.

The appendix provides the reader with the transcription conventions, notes, references and a thematic index. The use of end-notes may prove a little distracting for those readers who want to consult them, but it is well worth the effort and highly recommended as some are very informative but too long to include as footnotes.

All in all, I must once again applaud this thought-provoking book that brings new and original ideas and perspectives to the study of court interpreting. A breath of fresh air.

## Reference

- **Orozco-Jutorán, Mariana** (forthcoming). "The TIPp project: developing technological resources based on the exploitation of oral corpora to improve court interpreting." *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 22.

**Mireia Vargas-Urpi**  
**Universitat Pompeu Fabra**  
E-mail: [mireia.vargas@upf.edu](mailto:mireia.vargas@upf.edu)<sup>2</sup>

---

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In fact, at the most recent Critical Link conference at Heriot Watt University (2016), as many as 28 papers focused on issues related either to legal or court interpreting.

<sup>2</sup> This review is part of the project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness: "The quality in translation as an element to safeguard procedural guarantees in criminal proceedings: development of resources to help court interpreters of Spanish – Romanian, Arabic, Chinese, French and English" (FFI2014-55029-R). It has also been supported by the AGAUR's recognition of MIRAS research group (2014SGR545).