

# Es preciso prevenir de la ilusión que generan las matemáticas y la estadística

*Sometimes we need to warn people about the illusion that  
mathematics or statistics will solve it all*

## Daniel GILE

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## INTRODUCCIÓN

En esta entrevista, Daniel Gile, uno de los referentes más importantes en el mundo de la interpretación, tanto en su faceta profesional como académica e investigadora, nos cuenta cómo llegó a ser intérprete tras haber estudiado Matemáticas y en qué medida este hecho ha influido en su forma de aproximarse a la investigación en interpretación. Además, nos ofrece un certero análisis sobre el estado actual de la disciplina, tanto en España como a escala internacional.

**Palabras clave:** interpretación; modelo de esfuerzos; interpretación de conferencias.

## ENTREVISTA

Fecha: 2/3/2016

**Jesús Baigorri:** Buenas tardes. Un día más, estamos en el programa Don de Lenguas, el programa de la Facultad de Traducción y Documentación de la Universidad de Salamanca. Hoy tengo el placer de contar como entrevistado con el doctor Daniel Gile, una persona que ha trabajado durante muchos años en pro de la investigación y de la enseñanza de la interpretación y al que he conseguido convencer para entrevistar. Professor Gile, good afternoon.

**Daniel Gile:** Hola.

**JB:** We are going to start talking about your background in the field of Languages, because it is quite surprising to me to know that you started studying mathematics as your first choice, but then you but then you became an interpreter and a researcher in the field of Interpreting and Languages. How did this happen?

**DG:** Well, when I was a child I travelled with my parents. We lived in a number of countries, and I picked up a few languages, more or less, but my primary interest was mathematics. I did not have much talent for other subjects such as literature, which was very mysterious to me, and I did indeed study mathematics. While I was studying, I was working as a translator, without any prior training. I had to earn my living. When I graduated and started working, I realized that company life as a young mathematician, at least where I was, entailed no creative tasks. At that time, young people of my generation were not worried about finding a job. The situation was very different from what it is now. So I decided to extend my studies to other disciplines. Eventually I drifted off towards conference interpreting, and later towards research into translation and interpreting as well.

**JB:** So, you started as a translator, doing written translation rather than interpreting. How did you transition to oral translation?

**DG:** At one point, I decided to study Japanese. In 3rd year Japanese we had an 'introduction to consecutive interpreting' class with a teacher who was a conference interpreter. He thought I just might have some talent for conference interpreting, and directed me towards ESIT, which was located in the same building where the Japanese classes were held. Somehow I got admitted to the conference interpreter training program at ESIT, and somehow I graduated and became an interpreter.

**JB:** But not with the Japanese-French combination? Or was it with it?

**DG:** No, my language combination upon graduation was French, English and German.

**JB:** Alright. Where did you study Japanese? Was it in the Oriental Studies Institute?

**DG:** Actually, I started on my own. Then I went to the Paris Oriental Languages School, Langues O', as we call it. Then, I went to Japan.

**JB:** Because there was a tradition in Paris of oriental languages since the Middle Ages, actually, not only for the relationships with the Ottoman Empire, because this is obviously the Far East, not the Near East.

**DG:** Yes, it is the same tradition, the same Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales.

**JB:** INALCO.

**DG:** Yes, that is the one.

**JB:** You went through ESIT, and then you found a job immediately afterwards, or did you start working as a freelancer? Were you a staff interpreter somewhere?

**DG:** I worked as a freelancer for two years, and then I was hired by the South Pacific Commission in Noumea as a staff interpreter and translator. Then I returned to Paris as a freelancer. Yes, I think that was the sequence of events, which I am trying to retrace. Then I went to Japan on a research fellowship, right after I finished a PhD in Japanese. And while in Japan, I received a fax from my former doctoral supervisor suggesting that I apply for a position as an associate professor at INALCO in the Japanese and Korean Department. I did, and this is when I became an academic.

**JB:** How was life in the South Pacific?

**DG:** Wonderful. How many hours do you have to spend on that topic? It was great. Many outsiders who come to live in the the South Pacific for a while just can't leave. One great advantage when you work as an interpreter for the South Pacific Commission is that you travel to very small countries as a member of the SPC delegation and get to talk to local people and learn about their real needs, their real life. Unlike what happens if you work as an interpreter for organizations in large countries. You also get to enjoy all the beauty of nature, the music, the dancing, all the traditions, all the cultures of the Polynesians, Melanesians and Micronesians. It was a wonderful experience.

**JB:** Because for us, as Western Europeans, the Utopia might be located down there, or Paradise might be located down there. As it was probably for Gauguin and for others.

**DG:** I did not quite live the life of Gauguin, not really. Anyway, life there was very pleasant, but after a few years you want to interact with more people, with larger social circles.

**JB:** From INALCO you went on to different higher-education institutions? You stayed there for a long time?

**DG:** The problem at INALCO was that I was interested in translation and interpreting research in general, not limited to Japanese, while colleagues in my department wanted me to focus on Japanese. There was another thing too: institutionally, INALCO did not have the 'habilitation' accreditation which makes it possible for members of its faculty to get the required qualification to apply for full professorship. So I moved on, and went elsewhere.

**JB:** That elsewhere was Lyon?

**DG:** Yes, the next job was at Université Lyon 2. It was an interesting experience.

**JB:** But you continued all this time working as an interpreter, right?

**DG:** Yes.

**JB:** With the language combination you mentioned before, German, English and French, or did you add other languages?

**DG:** Officially, I only have French and English. I stopped working with German after a few years because I was interested in interpreting at scientific and technical conferences, and at medical conferences. I was not interested in industrial conferences. Working for the steel industry and for other French, English and German industrial organizations was not very attractive to me. What is more, it took a lot of work to maintain my German at professional level. So I decided after a few years to work with French and English only.

**JB:** You continued with research and you started with the work that has to do with a general reflection on how research can be conducted in the field of conference interpreting. *Regards sur la recherche en interprétation de conférences*. What was the importance of this work for your own career afterwards in the sense of opening lines of scientific curiosity, scientific endeavors, etc.?

**DG:** I did not plan to become an academic, it just happened. What I do know now which I did not realize for a long time is that there is something in my personality make-up which attracts me strongly to research in general. Working on solving problems in mathematics is also a form of research. I had also studied sociology, and had participated in a research project by a sociologist. When I get interested in a topic, I try to understand as much as possible. I do not claim I succeed in understanding, but I try. I got very interested in the hows of interpreting and I looked for explanations for various phenomena I observed. Where I was, at ESIT, the explanations of Seleskovitch, which

dominated the scene at that time, were attractive. But once you started digging, you found that something was not quite satisfactory. Looking more closely at the way research was being done at ESIT and by followers of its paradigm, I realized that it was not in line with what I knew about research. I started exploring other ways to investigate interpreting. This, by the way, led to many misunderstandings. People thought that because I was initially a mathematician I was only interested in quantitative research, in empirical research, that I disregarded theoretical research. Yes, I have a certain mindset, and it was further shaped, or perhaps «misshaped» by my mathematical background. But I also explore other avenues, and have a lot to say for non-quantitative, non-empirical research as well. I have been thinking of recent developments in translation and interpreting research, both empirical and theoretical, and find them very positive. I also think that sometimes we need to warn people about the illusion that mathematics or statistics will solve it all.

**JB:** But the truth is that the research of the time, both in the field of translation and both in the field of interpreting, was quite scarce. There was very little background. You have mentioned the dominating paradigm of *Théorie du sens*, but, in fact, there was very little research as such. It was something that was done as an intuitive, spontaneous occupation rather than a profession. In this sense, the academic research that was carried out in this pioneering work of yours was professional and in line with other professions at that time. Do you agree with this?

**DG:** I think the real pioneers were the psychologists, and interpreters like Barbara Moser. I was lucky enough to be in a sort of intermediate position, having understood what they were doing and being able to talk to professional interpreters and professional translators as well. Being able to put things in simple language. My own research was not very sophisticated. I was lucky to come up with simple ideas that meant something to people.

**JB:** How did you come up with the efforts model? I imagine it was something that you experienced personally in the booth while working, and that you came to formalize in a so-called formula that has to do with physics and the way in which we work with energy and with the way we administer the intellectual or the energy capital that we have at the beginning of a, for example, a conference or of an assignment. And then, you wrote this formalization which has become famous, which is widely used, I suppose, in many universities, the effort models.

**DG:** It is interesting that you should mention that perhaps the formulation of the models has something to do with my background. You may be right. When studying mathematics, you also study physics. Be it as it may, I was not aware of that. What I was aware of was the fact that in interpreting there were many errors, many infelicities, obvious difficulties, so I endeavored to find the reasons, and then attempted some modeling

as a way to help in the analysis. Simple models. Beyond intuition and introspection, what really helped me were cognitive theories of that time, the 1970s. Some led to the formulation of a few ideas that people seem to have found useful. But there were other colleagues who designed more sophisticated models, who knew more about cognitive science than I did. Barbara Moser, Robin Setton a decade and a half later, and others. They were not lucky enough to have the same influence, perhaps because the level of sophistication of their models was such that it was more difficult to connect them with reality as it is experienced in the booth and in the classroom. My own models, which were perhaps a bit more specific than Seleskovitch's theory, were still within the reach of students who were not into theory.

**JB:** When you were designing the model, I suppose you tested it not only in your own interpreting experience but also while teaching, with your students. Was it like that?

**DG:** Yes, of course. But this was not testing in the scientific sense. The Effort Models are essentially a way of organizing our known experience. The only truly theoretical part, which has been and is still being tested, and which so far, I think, seems to be holding its ground, is the «tightrope hypothesis», which says we tend to work close to our cognitive limits, close enough for even little problems to make us stumble and fall. One colleague has challenged it on the basis of pupillometric data, but you cannot test it by measuring the proportion of dilation of the interpreter's pupil at any time against its maximum value, and as I have explained elsewhere, pupil dilation measures cognitive effort, not cognitive load or pressure. Anyway, the test of the didactic value of the models is classroom experience. You talk to students, you see their reactions. The models help explain why teachers give them this or that advice, why it makes sense or does not make sense to take notes in the source language, in the target language, etc. And they encourage students to keep fighting in spite of the difficulties they experience, in spite of the fact that sometimes they think «my God I don't have an A language» or «my languages are all C or D languages, and I will never make it». I was happy to receive comments such as «Thank you for your effort models. They encouraged me to continue. I thought that I would never be able to make it, but now I know the reasons for which things are difficult, and there is hope for an improvement in the future». This is my test of the usefulness of the models in the classroom.

**JB:** But I guess that positive feedback does not come only from some of the students but also from some fellow researchers.

**DG:** Yes, this is true. I am very grateful to colleagues who generously provide me with feedback.

**JB:** Dealing with this model, have you come up with the necessary ingredients of an interpreter, or a would-be interpreter, in order to materialize their desire? Because this is

interesting for the students. I mean, in your experience, what are really the conditions, the «sine qua non's» that should be matched by the would-be interpreters?

**DG:** I'm afraid that I don't have any answer on the basis of the effort models or on any other solid basis. There is much that has been written on this question by colleagues with a lot of experience, with a lot of intuition, who know the field very well. I also think requirements may differ slightly depending on where one works, in what environment.

**JB:** And on the language combination, and so on...

**DG:** And on the needs of the market. You have to know the local environment. Prerequisites may well be somewhat different in Korea, in Japan, in Germany. I do not like to make general claims without solid evidence.

**JB:** Just a few words about the future of research from your vantage point.

**DG:** I feel encouraged by developments that I have been witnessing in the field these past few years. There is obviously more interaction between researchers, more openness. There are still people who believe in the absolute superiority of a single research paradigm. I am thinking in particular of one colleague who claims that the only valid evidence comes from experiments, so-called true experiments. But most researchers who investigate translation and interpreting nowadays understand that we can do a lot with different paradigms and I see more and more diversified research being done, including empirical research, mixed methods research, with research groups that pool together different types of knowledge and skills. We do have financial limitations, but a lot of progress is being made. I am much more optimistic than I was in the past.

**JB:** Since you are quite often in the East, in Guangdong, in Shanghai, in Japan, etc., do you see any kind of hybridization between East and West regarding also research? How do you see this element?

**DG:** I think it was present from the start, in a way. Masaomi Kondo, who set up the Japan Association for Interpretation Studies, now Japan Association for Interpretation and Translation Studies, decided to do so when he learned about interpreting research in the West. The Chinese also took much of their inspiration from the West. So did the Koreans. But nowadays there are many joint projects, especially in cognitive translation and interpreting studies, with much participation from China, which is now exporting a translation philosophy of its own, Eco-translatology. I don't know how successfully. Anyway, we need to keep our eyes open to what happens in the East. Will we be able to learn from the Chinese, the Japanese, the Koreans and other people in Asia and perhaps elsewhere who are doing research into interpreting?

**JB:** I am afraid we are running out of time and just a few words as a final conclusion or final comment on the situation you perceive in Spain regarding interpreting in interpreting schools.

**DG:** I am glad you mention Spain. I am a big fan of Spain, and I appreciate the way Spanish interpreting researchers, in Granada and elsewhere, cooperate. I think that from the nineties on, for institutional reasons, there has been more and more research into translation and interpreting in Spain. The great interaction between colleagues, the leadership of a number of personalities, including yourself and people like Ángela Collados Aís, make interpreting research very active here. There is quite a number of Spanish PhDs on interpreting, the latest by Rafael Barranco-Droege. I hope he gets his chance in the difficult economic environment we have now. His work deserves recognition.

**JB:** Thank you, professor Gile. Hopefully we can continue this conversation one day. Probably not here in Granada, but in Salamanca.

**DG:** Ojalá.

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## NOTA BIOGRÁFICA



Daniel Gile estudió Matemáticas y Sociología. Comenzó a trabajar como traductor en 1970 y como intérprete de conferencias en 1979, momento en el cual empezó a interesarse por la investigación en traducción e interpretación. Ha obtenido sendos doctorados en Japonés (1984) y en Lingüística (1989), ambos relacionados con la traducción y la interpretación. Actualmente, es profesor emérito en la ESIT, Université Paris 3 - Sorbonne Nouvelle. Fue cofundador y presidente de la European Society for Translation Studies (EST). Asimismo, es fundador de la red internacional CIRIN, especializada en la investigación sobre interpretación de conferencias, y editor de su boletín semestral. Su lista de publicaciones, seminarios y conferencias está disponible en <https://cirin-gile.fr>

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