

Charting New Terrain in Translation and Interpreting Research

I. Introduction

Field Research on Translation and Interpreting (2025), edited by Regina Rogl, Daniela Schlager, and Hanna Risku and published by John Benjamins in 2025, represents a timely and concerted effort to consolidate and advance methodological debates within Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS). The volume emerges from a dedicated conference (FIRE-TI 2022) and brings together scholars employing diverse field research approaches to examine translation and interpreting (T&I) as situated social practices. The book's central problematic is the persistent methodological gap in TIS concerning how to systematically study T&I phenomena within their natural, real-world contexts, beyond the laboratory or the textual product. Its core argument is that a deliberate and reflexive engagement with field research—understood broadly as research conducted outside the scholar's institutional setting to gather context-embedded data—is not merely beneficial but essential for understanding the complexity, materiality, and social embeddedness of T&I processes (Rogl, Schlager & Risku, 2025).

The editors, based at the University of Vienna, are established figures in socio-cognitive and ethnographic approaches to TIS. Hanna Risku's long-standing work on situated and extended cognition has consistently argued for studying translators and interpreters "in the wild" (Risku, 2014). This volume is a logical culmination of their research trajectory, moving from theoretical advocacy to providing a collective, practical roadmap for field-based inquiry. To appreciate its contribution, one must situate the book within significant shifts in the discipline. TIS has undergone a notable "sociological turn" (Wolf & Fukari, 2007), shifting focus from texts and abstract competence to translators/interpreters as social agents, their workplaces, networks, and institutional constraints. Concurrently, a "cognitive turn" has evolved from early psycholinguistic models towards recognizing the situated, embodied, and distributed nature of cognitive processes (Risku, 2014). Both turns create a demand for methodologies that can access the messy reality of practice, a demand often unmet by traditional textbook prescriptions. While ethnographic methods have gained traction over the past two decades—as seen in seminal works like Koskinen's (2008) ethnography of EU institutions—discussions have often been scattered or subsumed under specific case studies. This volume directly addresses this fragmentation by making field research its central, unifying theme.

This introduction argues that *Field Research on Translation and Interpreting* successfully establishes a foundational framework for field-based inquiry in TIS, offering valuable conceptual clarity, methodological diversity, and rich empirical exemplars. It convincingly demonstrates the epistemological value of immersing oneself in the field to uncover the often-invisible dimensions of T&I work, from paraprofessional practices to affective labour. However, its overarching enthusiasm for the field research paradigm, while generative, may occasionally understate the significant practical, ethical, and analytical challenges inherent in such approaches,

particularly regarding their transferability across vastly different cultural and institutional contexts. The book's primary strength lies not in presenting a single, rigid methodology but in showcasing a productive methodological pluralism rooted in a shared commitment to contextual understanding.

The volume is structured into four cohesive parts, each exploring a critical facet of field research. Part I, "Delving into specific ethnographic approaches," provides focused methodological proposals. Kaisa Koskinen advocates for a "translatorial linguistic ethnography" to study paraprofessional translation in organisations, while Jemina Napier examines the potential of Linguistic Ethnography for interpreting studies. Lucía Ruiz Rosendo and Alma Barghout introduce "retrospective ethnography" to access hard-to-reach fields like UN missions. Part II, "Centering on positionality, reflexivity and ethics," tackles the core subjective dimensions of field research. Chapters by Sari Hokkanen, Cornelia Staudinger, and Vanessa Steinkogler offer nuanced accounts of evolving researcher roles (practisearcher (研究者兼実践者)), and Aurélien Riondel critically examines procedural ethics versus situated ethical practice. Part III, "Zooming in on processes and materiality," shifts focus to the detailed analysis of practice. Using approaches like distributed cognition and Actor-Network Theory, chapters by Raphael Sannholm, Annamari Korhonen, and Marlie van Rooyen demonstrate how to trace cognitive and social processes through artefacts and interactions. Finally, Part IV, "Integrating marginalised groups and phenomena," expands the scope of TIS by applying field research to readers of translated fiction, refugees, asylum seekers, and even interspecies communication, challenging traditional boundaries of the discipline.

The book's introduction by the editors adeptly frames these contributions. It thoughtfully defines key concepts, distinguishing between field research (the overall design) and fieldwork (the data collection phase) (Rogl, Schlager & Risku, 2025, p. 10–11). It traces the evolution of the "field" from a fixed geographic site to a constructed, potentially multi-sited and digital network of relationships, a conceptual update crucial for studying contemporary T&I practices (Hine, 2016). Furthermore, it identifies recurring, messy themes—positionality, reflexivity, ethics—that bind the diverse chapters together, acknowledging that field research is an interpretive, relational, and often non-linear journey.

In summary, this collection marks a significant step towards methodological maturity in TIS. It moves beyond scattered applications of ethnographic methods to propose field research as a coherent, vital paradigm for the discipline. The following analysis will evaluate how effectively the book constructs this paradigm, examining its theoretical foundations, methodological toolkit, empirical evidence, and its acknowledgment of the inherent complexities and limitations of taking research into the field.

II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

The edited volume, *Field Research on Translation and Interpreting*, represents a significant and timely intervention aimed at consolidating and systematizing a methodological approach that has gained considerable momentum within Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS) over the past two decades. The book's central and compelling argument is that a deep, context-sensitive understanding of translation and interpreting (T&I) as situated social practices cannot be achieved solely through textual analysis, laboratory experiments, or decontextualized surveys. Instead, it necessitates empirical engagement "in the wild"—researchers leaving their offices to observe, participate in, and document these practices within the complex social, material, and affective

environments where they naturally occur (Risku & Rogl, 2022; Rogl et al., 2025, p. 9). This review's body critically examines the book's contribution through four interconnected scholarly lenses: its theoretical and methodological positioning; the coherence and practical challenges of its proposed methodological toolkit; the evidentiary basis and scope of its arguments; and its broader disciplinary implications and unresolved tensions.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations and Disciplinary Positioning

The volume's core contribution lies in its robust theoretical reframing of what constitutes legitimate knowledge in TIS. The editors and contributors collectively argue for a situated, practice-oriented epistemology, positioning field research not merely as a data-collection tactic but as an essential paradigm for understanding translation and interpreting as socially embedded activities. This stance is rooted in several converging theoretical streams: the sociological turn in translation studies, which shifted focus from texts to agents and networks (Wolf & Fukari, 2007); situated and embodied cognition theories, which view cognitive processes as inextricably linked to physical and social environments (Hutchins, 1995); and practice theory, which emphasizes the analysis of routinized, socially recognized activities (Olohan, 2021).

The book's introduction eloquently critiques the lingering "lab mentality" in parts of TIS, where processes are studied in isolation from their natural habitats. It posits that to understand why translators and interpreters make certain decisions, one must also understand the material constraints, organizational hierarchies, affective dynamics, and tacit knowledge that shape their work. This represents a significant maturation of the "social turn." While earlier sociological approaches often relied on theoretical models (Bourdieu's field theory) or product-based analysis, this volume insists on empirical, in-situ engagement as the primary path to theory-building. As such, it aligns with and advances the agenda of "Translator Studies" (Chesterman, 2009), which centres the agent, but does so through a distinctly ethnographic and phenomenological lens.

However, a critical tension arises from this strong situated epistemology. The book's advocacy for deep contextual understanding is compelling, yet it occasionally risks presenting an overly dichotomous view, implicitly contrasting "authentic" field knowledge with "artificial" lab or text-based findings. While the call to "follow the actors" (Latour, 2005) is crucial, the volume could engage more explicitly with how insights from controlled experiments, corpus analysis, or text linguistics might dialogue with and be enriched by field data, rather than being seen as fundamentally separate or inferior. A more integrative methodological framework, acknowledging different but complementary types of knowledge, could strengthen its argument.

2.2 Methodological Toolkit: Innovation, Rigour, and Ethical Nuance

The most substantial and praiseworthy section of the book is its concrete exposition and refinement of field methodologies. It moves beyond generic endorsements of ethnography to dissect its specific applications and hybrids within TIS. Key methodological innovations highlighted across the chapters include:

1) Linguistic Ethnography (LE): Both Kaisa Koskinen (Chapter 1) and Jemina Napier (Chapter 2) champion LE, which combines the holistic, contextual depth of ethnography with fine-grained analysis of linguistic and interactional data. This is a powerful response to critiques that ethnography in TIS sometimes neglects the textual/linguistic core of translational practice. Napier's retrospective analysis of her own sign language interpreting research demonstrates how LE can reveal the co-construction of meaning and power dynamics in

interpreted encounters, moving from what was said to how and why it was said in that specific social context.

2) Retrospective and Autoethnographic Designs: The chapters by Lucía Ruiz Rosendo & Alma Barghout (Chapter 3) and Sari Hokkanen (Chapter 4) showcase creative adaptations to field constraints. Ruiz Rosendo & Barghout employ retrospective reflexive ethnography to access the sensitive, closed world of UN field missions, using “remembered data” and the concept of “past presencing.” Hokkanen re-analyses her own past autoethnographic data on church interpreting from a radically changed researcher positionality, offering a masterclass in reflexivity as an analytical tool. These chapters validate that “the field” is not always physically accessible in real-time and that researcher subjectivity, when rigorously examined, becomes a source of insight rather than bias.

3) Multi-sited and Digital Ethnography: Implicitly and explicitly, the volume acknowledges that contemporary “fields” are often networked, hybrid, and digital. References to connective ethnography (Hine, 2016) and the challenges of pandemic-era remote research (discussed in the Introduction and Lucile Davier’s chapter) reflect engagement with cutting-edge methodological debates. This updates traditional ethnographic ideals for studying globalized, online, and dispersed translation practices, such as those in fan communities or distributed freelance markets.

The book’s handling of ethics and positionality is particularly sophisticated, moving beyond procedural checklists. Chapters by Aurélien Riondel (Chapter 8) and Vanessa Steinkogler (Chapter 6) argue convincingly for a situated, relational ethics that evolves throughout the research process. They highlight the inadequacy of one-time informed consent forms for long-term, immersive fieldwork where relationships and power dynamics constantly shift. The recurring theme of the practisearcher — the researcher who is also a practitioner — is critically examined, showing how this dual role facilitates access and empathy but also creates complex ethical and analytical challenges regarding role conflict and assumed norms.

A potential methodological limitation, however, surfaces in the practical scalability and resource demands of the proposed approaches. Long-term immersion, multi-sited fieldwork, and the intense reflexivity required are time-consuming and costly. While the book is an excellent guide for PhD researchers and well-funded projects, it speaks less to how these ideals might be adapted in more constrained research environments. Furthermore, while qualitative depth is its strength, a broader discussion on mixed-methods designs—strategically combining field observations with surveys, experiments, or computational analysis—would have provided a more comprehensive methodological vision.

2.3 Case Studies, Data, and Argumentative Coherence

The volume’s argument is grounded in a diverse array of empirical case studies, which serve as its core evidence. These range from institutional settings (EU agencies, UN missions, national parliaments) to community and activist contexts (NGOs, refugee centers, animal welfare outreach). This selection is a major strength, demonstrating the applicability of field research across the spectrum of professional, paraprofessional, and non-professional T&I practices. The focus on marginalized groups and phenomena in Part IV (asylum seekers, readers of translations, interspecies communication) is especially valuable, pushing the boundaries of what and who is considered relevant in TIS.

The data types analysed are correspondingly rich: field notes and diaries (analysed as both records and affective artefacts), audio/video recordings of interactions, artefacts like revision files and software interfaces, interview transcripts, and institutional documents. This multimodality showcases how field research synthesizes different data streams to build a thick description. For instance, Annamari Korhonen (Chapter 10) innovatively combines artefact analysis of translation software features with systemic functional discourse analysis of revisers' comments, linking material constraints to linguistic choices.

The linkage between this rich data and the book's central conclusions is generally persuasive. The cases convincingly illustrate how field research uncovers invisible labour (paraprofessional translation in organizations), materially distributed cognition (the use of tools and templates in translation workplaces), and the affective and political dimensions of T&I work. The argument that standardized codes of ethics or professional norms often fail to capture the messy reality of practice is well-supported by the ethnographic evidence presented.

However, the geographic and linguistic scope of the case studies, while diverse, exhibits a certain bias. A significant number of chapters draw on fieldwork in European institutional or NGO contexts (Austria, Switzerland, Finland, EU). This is understandable given the editors' and many contributors' affiliations, but it prompts the question of how the proposed methodological framework travels to, and is challenged by, non-Western, post-colonial, or majority-world contexts. Issues of positionality, access, and ethics become even more complex when researchers from the Global North study practices in the Global South. The book would have been further strengthened by including more contributions explicitly grappling with these cross-cultural research dynamics.

2.4 Contributions, Unresolved Questions, and Style

Field Research on Translation and Interpreting makes several definitive contributions. Firstly, it provides the first comprehensive methodological manifesto for field research in TIS, consolidating scattered insights into a coherent volume. Secondly, it successfully bridges sociological and cognitive perspectives, showing how studying the "outer" social world is essential for understanding the "inner" cognitive processes of translators and interpreters, and vice versa (Risku & Rogl, 2022). Thirdly, it elevates reflexivity and ethics from peripheral concerns to central, ongoing methodological practices.

Inevitably, the book also leaves some questions open, pointing to future research directions. One major unresolved issue is the theory-data loop. While the book excels at showing how to gather rich data, it is less explicit on the precise steps for moving from that data to mid-range or grand theory. How do we generalize from deeply situated case studies? Another question concerns the digital transformation of the field. While touched upon, the profound implications of AI, platformization, and fully remote work for field research methodologies deserve a more dedicated focus. Is "following the algorithm" part of future ethnographic practice?

In terms of style and presentation, the writing is consistently clear, accessible, and engaging, avoiding unnecessary jargon. The use of first-person narratives in many ethnographic accounts makes the methodological challenges and insights relatable. The structure, dividing the book into thematic parts, effectively guides the reader from foundational approaches to complex applications.

III. CONCLUSION

Charting a Future for Embodied and Embedded Inquiry

Field Research on Translation and Interpreting successfully consolidates a crucial methodological paradigm shift within Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS). Its core contribution lies not merely in advocating for ‘going to the field,’ but in meticulously articulating how to do so in a manner that is theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous, and ethically responsible. The volume makes a compelling case that understanding translation and interpreting as situated, embodied, and social practices necessitates a corresponding research approach that embraces complexity, reflexivity, and the co-construction of knowledge. By bridging sociological and cognitive perspectives through a shared commitment to empirical, context-sensitive inquiry, the editors and contributors have provided a foundational reference point and a rich source of inspiration for future research.

The book’s principal strength is its systematic and multifaceted exploration of the how of field research. It moves beyond a monolithic view of ethnography to showcase a spectrum of approaches—from linguistic ethnography and retrospective autoethnography to artefact analysis and multispecies ethnography. This methodological pluralism is a significant asset, demonstrating that the ‘field’ can be accessed and understood through diverse data types and analytical lenses, whether by following actors, analysing material traces, or engaging in deep personal reflection. The consistent emphasis on positionality, reflexivity, and situated ethics throughout the chapters elevates the discussion from mere technique to a profound engagement with the epistemological and relational foundations of qualitative research. This reflexive turn is arguably the volume’s most important legacy, insisting that researchers account for their role in shaping the field and the knowledge produced.

However, the volume’s persuasive mapping of this methodological terrain inevitably opens up new questions and reveals certain limitations. While its case studies are geographically diverse, there remains a discernible weighting towards institutional contexts in European and Anglophone settings (EU institutions, Swiss federal administration, Austrian NGOs). The challenge of applying these deeply contextualised methodological principles in vastly different cultural, political, and academic environments is not fully explored. For instance, how are concepts of researcher reflexivity or informed consent negotiated in contexts with different traditions of academic authority or privacy? Future work must actively engage with scholars from the Global South to test, adapt, and expand the methodological toolkit presented here, ensuring it does not become a new prescriptive standard but evolves through global dialogue (Tymoczko, 2007).

Furthermore, while the book adeptly captures the ‘messiness’ of physical and social fields, the definition and methodological treatment of digital fields feel less settled. Although mentioned, as in Rogl’s (2022) work on online communities or the discussions on pandemic-induced remote research, the profound implications of digital ethnography for TIS require even more focused attention. Digital translation spaces—from crowdsourcing platforms and social media fandoms to the integration of AI tools in professional workflows—create fields that are simultaneously ubiquitous, archived, and fragmented. Researching them demands methods that can trace dispersed, asynchronous, and algorithmically mediated interactions (Cronin, 2023). The next frontier for field research in TIS will involve developing robust frameworks for such connective ethnography (Hine, 2015) that can account for the hybrid online-offline nature of contemporary translational practices.

The volume’s focus on practice and process, while a necessary corrective to earlier text-centric models, might also

benefit from a renewed dialogue with textual analysis. The call to ‘follow the actor’ and ‘uncover the invisible’ is powerful, but the ultimate ‘product’ of much translation and interpreting remains a text or an utterance. How can fine-grained textual analysis—for instance, of the translated or interpreted output generated within the observed field—be reintegrated into these socio-material investigations without reverting to decontextualised evaluation? A promising direction, hinted at in chapters like Korhonen’s, is the combination of discourse analysis with ethnographic observation to show how macro-social forces and micro-interactional decisions crystallise in textual form.

In the broader academic landscape, this book firmly positions field research as the empirical engine for several dominant ‘turns’ in TIS. It provides the methodological substance for the sociological turn, showing how to study translation as a social practice (Wolf & Fukari, 2007). It grounds the cognitive turn in real-world settings, advancing situated and distributed cognition perspectives (Risku & Rogl, 2021). It also resonates with the activist turn, as evidenced in chapters dealing with refugees, NGOs, and animal welfare, by offering methodological strategies for engaged, participatory research that seeks not only to understand but also to transform (Baker, 2006). Its implications for translator training are direct and practical, arguing for curricula that include ethnographic skills, ethical reasoning, and reflexivity to prepare students for the complex realities of the translation workplace.

In conclusion, *Field Research on Translation and Interpreting* is a landmark publication that successfully codifies and advances a vital research paradigm. It is both a manual and a manifesto: a manual for conducting rigorous, ethical, and insightful fieldwork, and a manifesto for a TIS discipline that is empirically grounded, theoretically sophisticated, and attuned to the lived experiences of translating and interpreting. Its limitations are primarily those of scope and emerging frontiers, pointing the way for future research. The book’s ultimate success will be measured by the quality and diversity of the field studies it inspires, as scholars continue to ‘search and research the field’ in an ever-changing world.

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