END-USERS' SUBJECTIVE REACTION TO THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENT INTERPRETERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a follow-up study of the paper 'The significance of speech levels in English-Japanese Interpretation' (Ng and Obana, this volume). In the above paper we reported that despite advanced language training, student interpreters still have difficulties with the subtleties of Japanese sociolinguistic rules. As Japanese people are known to be particularly attentive to language use, this study reports on 10 native Japanese speakers' (NJS) subjective reactions to prerecorded students' English-Japanese interpretations. In general, the results indicate NJS are most concerned about the ease in which they can understand the content of the interpretation. A vast percentage of their comments relate to the interpreters' grasp of the subject matter. As far as their opinion of language is concerned, an interesting sex difference can be seen. Though both males and females do comment on language related issues, females are more likely to comment on the inappropriate use of speech levels whereas males tend to confine their comments to the interpreters' lexical choice and overall fluency.

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to describe and analyse the opinions of native Japanese speakers who are likely to use interpreting services. This study is essentially a follow-up of another earlier study carried out by Ng and Obana (this volume, henceforth Ng and Obana). I will begin by giving a brief overview of the findings of our earlier study.

The previous study focused on the problems student interpreters had with Japanese speech levels. Briefly, speech levels can be loosely defined as 'grammaticised social relationship indicators'. As we all know, modes of interpersonal relationship and communication are conditioned by factors such as power and solidarity (status and familiarity). This, in turn, can be prominently reflected in the language use. Though such concepts are known to be more inherently entrenched in Asian societies, it is also found in English-speaking communities. For example, the choice and use of pronouns, terms of address and formality of styles are all indicative of our perception of our interpersonal relationships with others (see Brown and Gilman, 1960; Ervin-Tripp, 1969 and Labov, 1972). I used the word 'entrenched' because some Japanese linguists have actually argued that it is impossible for a Japanese speaker to make a statement which indicates a neutral social context (Matsumoto, 1989:208). Suppose, for example, that the speaker wishes to say 'Today is Monday'. English-speakers can say this sentence in this form to anybody: to their professor as easily as to their friends, to a large audience or their pet dog. In Japanese, it is not possible for the speakers to construct a sentence that can be said in all situations.

The following are some of the more frequent versions of 'Today is Monday':

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student interpretations in this study indicated that despite high proficiency in Japanese, student interpreters still violated certain sociolinguistic rules observed by native Japanese speakers. We identified a few categories of speech levels which are specifically relevant to the context of conference interpretation. The study highlights the importance of observing speech level rules in Japanese, it suggests that the interpretation is unsatisfactory without this highly refined and difficult skill. It was stressed that this aspect of Japanese communication is especially important in the formal setting of conference interpretation which is a very specific field of discourse.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The fact that the opinions of interpreter-educators and assessors differ from that of conference delegates and end-users is a widely acknowledged phenomenon. Kurz (1989) reported on such discrepancy in judgement in the English-German context in Vienna. Within the Italian community in Australia, Mauro (1990) has also reported the disagreement in assessment criteria between field supervisors and I/T educators. Hence, in this present study, by interviewing 10 end-users, we hope to find out if speech levels were as important as indicated by the IE in the previous study. Our working hypothesis is: ‘Appropriate use of speech levels is significant in English-Japanese interpretation at the conference level’.

Methodology

Subjects

Altogether, 10 native Japanese speakers took part in this study. Five were females and 5 were males. Though all the subjects were native speakers of Japanese, two of the subjects were monolinguals and the rest possessed varying degrees of fluency in English. The subjects were controlled for sex and SES. For the purpose of this experiment, we deliberately chose subjects who were likely to be exposed to interpreter services when attending public lectures and conferences. The age range of the subjects is between 30 and 55 years. Ideally, it would have been more desirable to have monolingual Japanese subjects but as most Japanese in Australia are
exposed to the use of English, some degree of competency in English is unavoidable.

Procedure
The material used was the recording of 3 student interpreters and 2 professional freelance interpreters interpreting a lecture on ‘Japan’s Technological Competitiveness’\(^1\) from English to Japanese. There were two stages in this study. In Stage 1, questions of a more general nature were asked. The aim of Stage 1 was to encourage a more spontaneous and unguided response from the subjects. Each subject was given the tapes containing the recordings of the interpretations. They were given a list of instructions and were requested to listen to the tapes and then answer the following questions:

1. Can you follow the interpretation? Do you get the message the interpreter is trying to convey?
2. What is your general impression of the Japanese used by each interpreter?
3. In your opinion, which of the interpreters gave the best interpretation and which of the interpreters gave the worst. Please rank them. If possible, please give a brief explanation of why you have chosen a specific ranking for each interpreter.

In Stage 2, which was held approximately a week after the subjects had received the tape, an individual interview was arranged. The aim of Stage 2 was to direct the subjects to more specific issues, particularly that of speech levels or levels of politeness used in the interpretations. Firstly, each subject was given a small briefing on the technical linguistic terms used to describe speech levels or the use of polite language in Japanese. Examples were provided to illustrate each point. Secondly, short segments of the tapes were played to refresh the subjects’ memory. After listening to each interpretation, they were asked the following questions:

1. As a native speaker, what do you think of the inappropriate use of speech levels in conference interpreting? Is it important?
2. Do you think it interferes with the content delivery?
3. Do you find it offensive?
4. Does it make you feel uncomfortable?

Following that, they were also requested to rate each interpreter (on a scale of 1 to 5) on their control of Japanese speech levels. The interview was recorded and transcribed.

Results
Stage 1
As discussed in the methodology, the aim of Stage 1 was to harness as much subjective reaction as possible without asking too many leading questions. For this purpose the comments were general in nature and covered a broad area. Because of the nature of the task, the results are qualitative rather than quantitative. Though all the subjects commented on the inappropriate use of speech levels in some of the interpreters, none of them overtly identified speech levels as the major factor against which they had assessed the interpreter. I used the word ‘overtly’ because 7 of the subjects pointed out that ‘Chris’ and ‘Debbie’ both spoke naturally and that they possessed close to native-like competence. ‘Chris’ and ‘Debbie’ also happen to be the two interpreters which the IE had assessed as being the most competent in their control of Japanese speech levels in the previous study. It remains an open question whether, by ‘natural’ and ‘native-like’ these subjects are unconsciously responding to ‘Chris’ and ‘Debbie’s’ efficient control of speech levels.

The comments in Stage 1 fall into the three broad categories of content, language and extralinguistic criteria. All the subjects were particularly concerned with whether the interpreters had grasped the meaning of the message. The most typical comments were ‘...interpretation is unclear...’, ‘...meaning not grasped...’ ‘...difficult to follow...’ etc. Interestingly, the subjects never once attributed opaqueness in the message to the speaker. Instead, the interpreters were criticised for giving obscure interpretations. The observation that end-users are quick to make such judgements has also been made by Kurz (1989) in her study. Though only three subjects openly stated that it was the duty of the interpreter to make the message clear to the audience, it was

\(^1\) The recordings were identical to the one used for the study on speech levels in Ng and Obama.
implicit in NJS comment that the interpreters are also expected to explain and elaborate on more obscure points. To that end, unlike IE, they were not as concerned with message fidelity. Anyway, as a rule the end user cannot compare the interpretation with the original and is thus unable to judge whether there is sense consistency.

Comments on the language in this study can be listed under the following subcategories:

2a. Naturalness, e.g. intonation, pronunciation and accent
b. Grammatical structure
c. Choice of vocabulary
d. Speech levels

In general, all the subjects commented on the intonation pattern of the interpreters. Both 'Debbie' and 'Chris' were rated quite high on this scale and 5 of the subjects went as far as saying that their intonation patterns were native-like. The adjectives used ranged from vague statements such as 'good/bad intonation pattern' to more specific ones such as 'foreign intonation' or 'intonation shows dialect influence'. The subjects also reacted badly to overuse of fillers or filled pauses such as 'um', 'er', 'ah' etc. The subjects also repeatedly pointed out the erroneous choice of words by the interpreters. While all the female subjects commented on the grammatical aspect of the interpretation, only one of the male subjects did so. Again, the remarks ranged from more general criticism like 'bad grammatical structure', 'construction is wrong' to 'wrong use of case endings' and 'use of particles is confusing'. The same pattern is repeated for the comments on speech levels. Again, only one male subject (the same one who commented on the interpreters' 'bad grammar') identified the incorrect use of speech levels as problematic. Though appropriate usage of speech level was not the primary concern of the female subjects, they all commented on this aspect briefly in relevant cases. In the extralinguistic category, comments tended to focus on aspects regarding style of delivery, such as speed, voice quality and confidence.

The results from Stage 1 indicate that though speech levels were discussed, it was by no means the most important variable singled out by the subjects. Furthermore, there were substantial sex and individual differences in the amount of importance ascribed to speech levels. Table 1 compares the IE's ranking of the student interpreters with the 10 NJS. As expected, this comparison indicate that the NJS ranked the student interpreters differently. The most marked difference is in the ranking of 'Brian'. However, the picture changes when we isolate the sex variable in the NJS ranking. The ranking of the female subjects is identical to that of the IE who in this case is also female.

**Table 1: RANKING OF OVERALL INTERPRETATION SKILLS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>IE</th>
<th>NJS</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Brian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sex differences in the ranking of 'Brian' are even more striking in this comparison. In further analyses it became apparent that male and female subjects had put a different emphasis in their comments.

While both sexes commented on the content of the interpretation and the naturalness of the language, it was noticeable that the females tended to place more importance on correctness of grammatical structure and speech levels. On the other hand, the males were marginally more attentive to the style of delivery and commented frequently on vocabulary choice. For example, in the case of 'Brian', all the females were particularly concerned that he kept making mistakes with Japanese case markings as well as using 'unsuitable words'. However, only 1 out of the 5 males interviewed saw the grammatical aberration as posing a problem. In fact, the other four males stressed that 'Brian' was more precise, self-assured and confident. Since 'Brian' is the only male in the sample, the fact that the sex differences noted could be due to an interaction effect between the subjects' and the interpreter's gender cannot be ruled out. A different study involving a larger sample with an equal number of interpreters would be needed.

In a recent study, it was found that 'Debbie' was perceived to have a higher level of speech level and 'Chris' was perceived to be 'Debbie'. However, this study indicates a marked difference in the ranking of the two interpreters.

**Table 2: RANKING OF SPEECH LEVEL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Speech Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Very Very High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A comparison of 'Debbie's' interpretation and 'Chris's' manipulation of long pauses, fillers and other long pauses is shown with the data. The presence of fillers and long pauses is in itself the result of some extralinguistic factor. However, in the case of 'Debbie', the excessive use of long pauses and fillers was clearly identified by the subjects as posing a problem. This is especially true in the context of interpreting the Japanese language, which is known for its symmetry and predictability. The fact that 'Debbie' was perceived as being 'Debbie' suggests that there was a clear distinction between the two interpreters.
equal number of both male and female interpreters would clarify the doubts.

In Stage 2, similar sex differences were found. Table 2 represents the results on the perception of the student interpreters' control of speech levels. Though there seems to be agreement between the sexes for interpreters 'Debbie' and 'Ellen', the difference in ranking of interpreters at both ends of the spectrum is again markedly different.

However, as evident from Table 2, in Stage 2 the ranking of the female NJS did not mirror that of the IE.

Table 2: RANKING OF COMPETENCE IN SPEECH LEVELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>IE</th>
<th>NJS</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Brian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Anne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A striking discrepancy is in the ranking of 'Debbie'. Though the IE ranked 'Debbie' as the best interpreter when it comes to speech level manipulation, both male and female NJS ranked her fourth. The NJS commented strongly on the long pauses and the overuse of conversational fillers in 'Debbie's' interpretation, which of course, is not totally relevant to the topic of speech levels. The problem in Stage 2 can be identified as the difficulty in isolating speech levels as a separate variable. In the comments, some of the subjects seemed to stray from the topic of speech levels to the more general problem of fluency. It was often quite difficult for the experimenter to confine the response of the subjects to that of speech levels. The reason for this difficulty could be due to the fact that as native speakers of the language, the subjects could be unused to the conscious process of speech level analysis. Though the lack of symmetry between the results in Stage 1 and 2 indicates that the interpreters in both stages are being assessed on different criteria, it seems that there was little agreement within the group as to what constitutes the appropriate use of speech levels. So, from this perspective, the implications which one can draw from the study in Stage 2 are limited.

Table 3: COMPARISON OF STAGE 1 AND 2 RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FEMALES</th>
<th>MALES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STAGE 1</td>
<td>STAGE 2</td>
<td>STAGE 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Chris</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Brian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Debbie</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Anne</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ellen</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Brian</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Brian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To the question of whether 'the correct use of speech levels' is important in interpretation in a formal context, 90% of the NJS agreed with the IE that the appropriate use of speech levels is highly significant in conference interpretation as well as business interpretation. However, most of them agreed that it probably is not as important in community interpretation. This suggests that conference interpretation is indeed a very specific field of discourse.

Only two subjects (both females) reported that the misuse of speech levels did interfere with the content of the interpretation. Although 90% of the subjects stressed the importance of using appropriate speech levels, none of them felt uncomfortable or offended when the speech levels were misused, which is contrary to the opinion of the IE. Some of the subjects commented that perhaps they would have reacted differently if the interpreters had been Japanese. This is interesting as it implies that perhaps the findings of this study may well have been different if the interpreters were native speakers of Japanese.

Discussion

The importance of speech levels.

The results of this study indicate that generally NJS do consider the appropriate use of speech levels an important aspect of conference interpretation in Japanese. However, contrary to
the IE's initial impression, misuse of speech level rules does not necessarily result in offending the audience. At this point, it is perhaps useful to bear in mind that had the interpreters been Japanese, the reaction might have been different. To use a Gilesian term, I am inclined to think that the subjects have 'accommodated' to the interpreters' status as second language learners (Giles, Taylor and Bourhis, 1973). On the whole, the female subjects seemed more attentive to the problems caused by the inappropriate use of speech levels than the male subjects. The difference in the ranking of student-interpreters amongst the IE, the male subjects and the female subjects, indicates that what constitutes appropriate use of speech levels is likely to be a controversial subject.

**Sex differences**

Though the original aim of the research was not to identify sex differences, striking discrepancies were found in male vs. female perception of the interpreters. Several studies in gender and language use have reported that women's speech tends to be more polite than men's. They suggested, for example, that women often use more standard forms of speech (Fischer 1958; Labov 1966; Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley 1967), are frequently the first to adopt upwardly mobile usages (Gal 1976; Labov 1972; Trudgill 1975), and in mixed-sex conversations exert less control (interrupt less frequently, successfully initiate conversational topics less often) than do men (Fishman 1978; Zimmerman & West 1975). In the Japanese context, Shibamoto (1985) has reported that sex-linked variation in Japanese extends into the use of syntactic rules. Callan and Gallois' (1982) study of language attitudes of Italo- and Greek- Australian youths have also found sex differences in the perception of speech. In a match-guise test, males were found to have rated the speakers very differently from females. Hence, with the above research in mind, it certainly comes as no surprise that we should also find sex differences in the perception of language use in this study. The increased attentiveness of the women to the use of speech levels corresponds to previous research that women are more concerned about the use of more 'polite' or standard forms.

**Implications from this study**

The fact that the expectations from interpreters may vary between IEs and the end users is a dilemma which several of us faced. These differences in expectations are also likely to differ from language pair to language pair, e.g. expectations to use appropriate levels of politeness is applicable to Japanese but not to French. Cartollieri (1983) has drawn attention to the fact that very often a good interpreter is two quite different people, who could mean one thing to a conference participant and another to a colleague. Though there is no easy solution to this problem, until the public can be educated about the role of interpreters, it is important that students of interpretation are explicitly aware of this situation.

The second implication which I would like to draw from this study is the issue of gender in the perception of interpreters. As I have pointed out before, given the background of research which reported significant differences between male and female language usage, it is not entirely surprising that we found sex differences in the end user's perception of the interpreters. Is it then too unreasonable to assume that such sex-linked variation also exists among the interpreter educators? Though sex-linked variations have been found in the assessment of other areas such as essay or report writing, I have not come across any studies which looked at gender with regard to IEs assessment of their students. I am aware of the fact that the issue of what constitutes a fair and adequate assessment has no clear-cut answers without confounding it with an additional variable. And obviously, further studies involving IEs only have to be conducted before clear conclusions can be drawn.

**References**


17:345-358.