

THE SYSTEMATIC USE OF IMPROMPTU SPEECHES IN TRAINING INTERPRETING STUDENTS

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Introduction

The present article is the result of two years of systematic use of impromptu speeches in the training of students attending the interpreting courses of Dutch into Italian at the SSLMIT of Trieste. It has been observed that some of the characteristics of speeches delivered without a previously written text – register variations and looser text structure in particular – appear to pose difficulties to Italian students interpreting from Dutch into their native language. After comparing impromptu speech with other speech production modes, the article argues that impromptu speeches, presented in a variety of interlinguistic communication settings, are a good pedagogical tool in the training of interpreting students.

1. Impromptu vs. other speech production modes

Douglas Biber (1995) identifies six theoretical dimensions (involved/informational production, narrative/non-narrative concerns, explicit/situation dependent reference, overt expression of persuasion, abstract/non abstract information and on-line informational elaboration) as keys to distinguish between spoken and written discourse. After conducting a statistical analysis of a number of texts he concludes that a significant overlapping of these dimensions is present in spoken and written texts. He argues that no absolute distinction between spoken and written forms can be made, rather, that the relations between spoken and written texts are complex and associated with a variety of different situational, functional and processing considerations (1995: 119).

Biber's conclusions in his analysis of speech and writing do not coincide with Dejean Le Féal's idea – rather extreme, at first glance, as is the title of her article "Why impromptu speech is easy to understand" – that one can generally tell after hearing the first sentence of a speech whether it is improvised or read from a written text. The explanation of this certainty lies in the subtly different characteristics of speech flow as produced by an improvised presentation or by a text read aloud (Dejean Le Féal 1982: 227).

Goffman (1981) classifies the various speech delivery modes in three main categories: memorisation, aloud reading and fresh talk (impromptu speech).

Memorisation is defined by Enkvist (1982: 14) as a thoroughly prepared and rehearsed text camouflaged as impromptu by adding fake impromptu signals, such as pretended hesitation pauses or wilful syntactic diversions and corrections. Aloud reading is commonly used at lectures, scientific congresses and assemblies where proceedings are characterised by a high degree of rituality, meticulously scheduled speaking times and presentation of committee reports. This is particularly the case of the plenary assemblies of the European Parliament.

Unlike previously drafted read aloud speech, also called complex discourse medium by Crystal and Davy (1968: 81), impromptu speech – fresh talk in Goffman's words (1981: 171) – is a text formulated by the animator from moment to moment, or at least from clause to clause with the assistance of notes.

Lehtonen (1982: 40) gives a classification of speaking types in terms of the immediacy of planning: a speech may be impromptu, i.e. delivered spontaneously without prior preparation; extemporaneous, i.e. planned in advance but presented freely; memorised, i.e. carefully prepared, committed to memory, and delivered by rote; or it may be a manuscript delivery, i.e. a speech read from a written manuscript.

As regards other relevant definitions of impromptu, Enkvist (1982) provides useful indications for identifying the main features of impromptu speech and expressly avoids the use of the terms "unplanned" or "unprepared" (as opposed to "planned" or "prepared") discourse, claiming that all types of discourse involve a certain amount of planning or preparation.

For the same reason, the term "improvised speech" used by Dejean Le Féal (1982: 221) appears inappropriate whereas the idea of unrehearsed speech implied by the term "impromptu" more aptly conveys the appropriate semantic nuance (Enkvist 1982: 11).

Intuitively, the degree of impromptness of a speech may vary depending on whether the script merely provides notes which must be elaborated upon and completed when they are converted into the spoken medium or whether the speech is presented by the speaker without any use of written notes. In the case of a speech with notes, the speaker may add comments, explanations and quotations and make use of auxiliary devices (slides, overhead sheets and other audio-visual material). Interaction between two speakers sharing the floor is another speech delivery form frequently adopted for presentations during business meetings.

Some speeches, for example at press conferences, may be of a mixed type, beginning with the reading aloud of a short script followed by questions from

journalists (as often as not ambiguous and convoluted). The speaker then replies with his/her own impromptu remarks, establishing a similar interaction to that of a debate.

2. Theories on comprehension and interpretation of impromptu speech

The linguistic aspects of impromptu speech were discussed by a number of scholars during the Symposium on Problems in the Linguistic Study of Impromptu Speech, held in Åbo (Turku), Finland, in 1981. The proceedings include contributions by professors of interpreting who examine the effects of impromptu speeches on conference interpreting with a view to demonstrating their hypotheses that impromptu speeches are easier to understand than scripted ones. More specifically, the articles by Dejean Le Féal, Kopczynski and Seleskovitch leave some scope for a future line of research in interpreting pedagogy. Seleskovitch in particular argues that

Impromptu speech is readily understood and translated, while prepared speeches make greater demands on him [the interpreter] and prove less amenable to successful rendering (Seleskovitch 1982: 241).

Research may take the form of a systematic analysis of the difficulties encountered by interpreters in handling impromptu speeches delivered during press conferences, debates, media events, interviews and round table discussions. Indeed, the collocation "conference interpreting" occurring in many studies that focus on the relation between impromptu and interpreting appears too restrictive. It may be more appropriate to consider the entire spectrum of interlinguistic communicative settings in which interpreting is required.

Generally speaking, the greater spontaneity with which an impromptu speech is delivered facilitates the listener's comprehension of the speaker's message. For the interpreter, who is both a listener and a speaker, good comprehension of the message in the source language (SL) is, of course, a prerequisite for a correct reformulation of any speech in the target language (TL).

Dejean Le Féal's hypothesis (1982) is that the concomitant processes of ideation and expression in the impromptu speaker leave tangible marks on the speech, rendering it more readily comprehensible. She identifies these tangible marks with: sentence segmentation, prosody and redundancy (1982: 222).

Sentence segmentation is closely connected with the listener's perception of speed or rate of delivery. A previously drafted text is not always delivered at a higher rate than an unscripted one as is commonly assumed. From her analysis of the simultaneous interpreting performances of fifty professional interpreters, Dejean Le Féal concludes that although the delivery rate of a speech is

measurable in terms of words per minute, its impact on the listener is entirely subjective.

In the absence of a script, the activity of ideation of a speech is evidenced through hesitation pauses which reduce the number of words uttered per sentence segment, i.e. the length of phrase sections between two pauses. One of the most recurrent opinions in this respect is that hesitation pauses in an impromptu speech normally delineate units of meaning, thus enabling the interpreter to segment the input message. According to the findings of Dejean Le Féal's research, short segments give interpreters the impression of a slower delivery than long segments, even if the objective rate of delivery is identical.

Hesitation pauses belong to the category of prosody, another fundamental element in the correct comprehension of a speech. It has been observed that words uttered after a moment of hesitation are often marked by a particular stress, as if they were pronounced with greater emphasis by the speaker. This phenomenon, called "acoustic relief" by Dejean Le Féal, appears to contribute to the auditory perception of the speech, hence to the comprehension of the speaker's thoughts. As a result of acoustic relief, sense in an impromptu speech is clearer than in a text read aloud. Hesitation pauses, therefore, function as indicators that an important concept will immediately follow in the speech flow.

Another factor affecting the comprehension of impromptu speech is the greater dynamic force applied to thoughts when they are expressed for the first time. So during the reading of a scripted speech, the dynamic force of the thought is not as great as at the moment at which it is first expressed, that is, when the speech is written.

Similarly to any other, impromptu speech is an act of communication and as Gile puts it

Communication is successful from the Sender's point of view if he manages to achieve his aim, that is [...] if he manages to inform, explain or convince (1991: 191).

To achieve these aims, an impromptu speaker can deliberately or accidentally use redundancy of meaning, e.g. in the form of repetitions, to inform or convince the audience or to explain his/her ideas more clearly. The degree of semantic redundancy in a speech obviously depends on each listener's receptivity and knowledge of the subject. But how can redundancy affect the interpreter's task? It gives him/her a second opportunity to understand and summarise the information perceived, a strategy which proves particularly useful in simultaneous interpreting.

Singly, sentence segmentation, prosody and redundancy would have little effect on comprehension. Combined, they allow the listeners to follow the speaker's reasoning more easily: the processing of language is thus facilitated

(Dejean Le Féal 1982: 237), rendering the meaning of the speech more explicit and the interpreter's job consequently less complex.

Analogous hypotheses have been put forward by Seleskovitch, whose assumptions (see above) regarding the ease of interpreting impromptu speech may require modification.

Seleskovitch, the formulator of the *théorie du sens* in interpreting, indicates prosodies, mimics, gestures, and the process of adaptation of the rate of delivery to the listeners carried out by the impromptu speaker as the features that trigger cognitive activities facilitating oral translation (1982: 242).

Assuming that the speaker's goal is communication, Seleskovitch states that the rate of delivery of an impromptu speech is adjusted to the shaping of sense in the speaker's mind. This type of delivery is more amenable to correct rendering by the interpreter since it depends on the flow of the speaker's ideas and emotions and not on the emphasis placed on their enunciation (as in aloud reading) and is described as one of the major reasons why impromptu speech is easier to understand and reformulate.

The speaker's adaptation to the audience is facilitated by the greater empathy generated by impromptu speech: generally, a speaker pauses to get feedback from the audience, repeats the points which need further clarification and reacts to their mimics. But what happens if a speech portion does not trigger such cognitive activities? The sense which Seleskovitch's approach is centred upon cannot be so readily understood by the listener/interpreter if the lexical items (words) uttered by the impromptu speaker do not respect elementary syntactic and semantic rules, as is often the case when the orator is speaking extemporaneously.

Furthermore, with her idea that non-linguistic carriers of sense, abundantly present in impromptu speeches, sometimes even outweigh the semantic components in determining sense, Seleskovitch is underrating the weight of words. It is difficult to imagine how the listeners' understanding can be in line with the speaker's (Seleskovitch 1982: 243) when the speaker's own discourse does not make sense. The following sections of this paper will provide examples of illogical structures that may arise from the low degree of planning typical of impromptu speeches.

In agreement with the two authors mentioned above, Kopczynski argues that the reading aloud of a written text (lecture, report, welcoming speech) intended for the spoken medium is probably the most common of all input messages in interpreting. He claims that the oral translation of spoken discourse is easier than the oral translation of written discourse, since the latter implies the filtering of written discourse through the spoken medium.

Through an analysis of the transcribed texts of some interpretations (into English) he indicates three impromptu speech features, called deviations, in the final TL product: hesitation, stuttering and false starts (1982: 258).

An important contribution to the discussion of the effects of impromptu speech on conference interpreting is Kopczynski's introduction of the concept of predictability of the discourse structure. Indeed, toasts, convivial speeches and inaugural addresses, for example, often in an impromptu form, are more ritualistic and have a more predictable structure than other types of speech.

Competence in the appropriate language registers, receptivity to paralinguistic cues and exophoric devices and the ability to transpose the interpersonal function of such speech events determine the quality of the interpreter's performance.

3. Impromptu speech in a pedagogical context

In March 1998, the SSLMIT of the University of Trieste played host to the first seminar held within the framework of the "assistance pédagogique" provided to interpreting faculties by the European Commission. The seminar, which was organised for students of interpreting from Dutch into Italian with the support of a European Commission staff interpreter with Dutch as his A language, served a dual purpose: to illustrate to students the European Commission's requirements in recruiting interpreters (the Commission's joint interpreting and conference service conducts tests for freelancers by having candidates interpret speeches not read aloud from previously written texts, both in the consecutive and in the simultaneous modes), and to improve students' skills in handling such speeches.

Throughout the week of the seminar, students, all with Italian as their A language, worked intensively with the speeches (some based on a few written notes) presented by the interpreter on a variety of subjects. The speeches, the length of which ranged from 5' to 11'40", were interpreted in the consecutive and simultaneous modes by third and fourth year students respectively, longer speeches being divided into two parts. All speeches were recorded and transcribed for further analysis (see also Ardito, forthcoming).

During interpreting classes before the seminar, a number of experiments had been conducted in which students interpreted speeches characterised by different levels of impromptuness and presented in the form of a lecture (live) by Dutch colleagues or national economic/political figures during televised debates and interviews (videotapes).

The first observation voiced unanimously by students during these exercises was that speeches of the impromptu kind have a different impact on the interpreting process from scripted speeches.

The greater spontaneity with which impromptu speeches were presented was indicated as the factor which facilitated their comprehension of the message, obviously a prerequisite for the correct reformulation of any type of speech in a target language.

Nonetheless difficulties emerged. An analysis of the students' tape-recorded renditions confirmed the conclusion, drawn from personal experience in conference and other interpreting settings, that impromptu speeches can pose obstacles to interpretation which are less recurrent in scripted ones.

Such obstacles can be identified with register (variations, bathos, humour) and looser text structure (syntactic and semantic inaccuracy).

3.1. Register

In mediating between languages, one of the interpreter's tasks is to translate a network of connotations and associations which accompany the actual words (Taft 1981: 58). Indeed, in all international communication settings, interpreters have to focus not only on what to translate, through a rapid mental selection of the words uttered by the speaker, but also on how to translate. In other words, the success of the mediation also depends on the interpreter's ability to conjugate the language register with the audience correctly (Snelling 1988: 48).

As regards the specific Dutch/Italian language pair, there is a striking difference between the register parameters applied by Dutch and Italian speakers to the same situational context. Even in formal contexts such as a plenary session of the European Parliament, Dutch MEPs adopt a much more informal language register than their Italian colleagues, characterised by colourful metaphors and idiomatic expressions which abound in the Dutch language.

This issue is particularly relevant when it comes to interpreting impromptu speeches in view of the speaker's looser control over register. The writing of a text to be delivered orally (e.g. for a lecture) inevitably implies proof-reading and in most cases rehearsal by the speaker; the text is therefore less likely to contain unexpected register variations.

Students interpreting from Dutch into Italian often appear unprepared for humour and sudden register variations such as bathos. This unpreparedness can be exemplified by the sudden silence that fell in all three booths during a simultaneous interpreting exercise with a videotaped debate on the success of the Dutch "polder model"¹. The chairman of the board of KPN (Koninklijke

1 The debate took place during the television programme "Buitenhof", conducted by the journalist Paul Witteman and broadcast by Nederland 3 on the 2nd of January,

PTT Nederland, Royal Dutch Telecom) was commenting on one of the reactions heard about KPN's expansion in Japan eight years ago:

*Ik kreeg acht jaar geleden ook de vraag van mensen: Wat mot de PTT in Tokio?... Dat klonk zo gek! Dat vaderlandse, traditionele postbedrijf... Wat moet dat over de grens?*²

Pronouncing "moet" (must, have to) as "mot", in Dutch, is a way of expressing irony and is also characteristic of some dialects spoken in the Netherlands. On that and other occasions during practice sessions, students' performances failed to produce the same rhetorical effect as the original text, coming up with solutions such as "*cosa farà la PPT a Tokio?*" (what is PTT going to do in Tokio?) whereas "*ma che ci va a fare la PTT a Tokio?*" (what on earth will the PTT do in Tokio?), for example, would have been more appropriate. In these circumstances, intonation, a precious resource for the interpreter often neglected in training methodology, can be used to maintain the ironic/critical tone of the source language without necessarily lowering the register of the target language.

3.2. Looser text structure

It is a widely held opinion that spoken language has a looser structure (see a.o. Leech and Svartik 1975:159) than written language. Bazzanella (1994), for example, claims that the immediacy of speech explains why spoken language is characterised by self-corrections and lexical inaccuracy. Written language, on the other hand, implies the possibility to delete, correct and extend the formulation time as long as required, hence a text must be semantically coherent, linguistically cohesive and well structured. Bazzanella also identifies the speaker's minimum planning opportunity, micro-planning, hence the difficulty of organising the intervention in real time (1994: 13-14), as one of the spoken language characteristic traits.

This leads to the conclusion that an impromptu speaker is more likely than one who is reading aloud a carefully prepared, scripted speech, to produce a text with a low degree of grammatical and lexical coherence, anacolutha and unfinished sentences ("thread-losing") and to express his/her thoughts without selecting the correct vocabulary (lexical cohesion). This is frequently the case of a speaker with insufficient command of the language he/she is using. Any interpreter with English as his/her B language will be aware of the problems

1997. The journalist was interviewing the chairmen of four leading Dutch companies about the situation of the Dutch economy.

2 "Eight years ago, I was also asked: What on earth is the PTT going to do in Tokyo? Such a typically Dutch postal service... Whatever will it do across the border?"

caused, for instance, by a non native speaker's disprosodic intonation or articulation.

It is commonly assumed that violation of the principles of coherence and cohesion in any text type can constitute a serious stumbling block in the process of communication.

If such violation is committed by the speaker, the logical transition between the various parts of the speech becomes unclear and the interpreter's comprehension of the message may be impaired. This makes for a more problematic target-text reformulation and the need for readjustment on the part of the interpreter in order to produce a target text which is perceived as coherent and cohesive by the audience.

This concept can perhaps be exemplified by personal experience at a consecutive interpreting assignment at a meeting between the managers of three small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) based in the Emilia-Romagna region and a delegation of local government politicians from several European countries (English was the working language). When asked about the reasons underlying the success of the Emilia-Romagna SMEs, one of the Italian businessmen, representing a company operating in the electromechanical engineering sector, replied that his company's success was due to the recent changes in its organisation, "*da una struttura a palafitte orizzontali ad una a palafitte verticali*" (literally, from a horizontal pile-dwelling structure to a vertical pile-dwelling structure).

The reaction of the Italian participants in the meeting confirmed that the interpreter was not the only listener who had not readily understood (Seleskovitch 1982: 241) the sense of such a bizarre scenario, followed by other similarly unconventional metaphors. To solve this problem the interpreter had to request an explanation from the speaker before beginning her rendition.

The complexity of the interpreter's task obviously increases during communicative events characterised by a high degree of interaction between interlocutors (e.g. during an interview or debate).

As already pointed out by various authors who have examined the characteristic traits of spoken language, syntactic instability appears more recurrent in spoken than in written language. Enkvist states that (1982: 18)

A first crux is that impromptu speech can be syntactically unstable. In some portions of a text a speaker may follow a well-defined syntactic code, but in other portions of a text he may produce patterns which conflict with that very code.

The intervention of a Dutch MEP during a plenary session of the European Parliament, dealing with the enlargement of the European Union (Agenda 2000) provides an example of syntactic ambiguity which caused students comprehen-

sion difficulties (and consequently ambiguity in the Italian reformulation) during a simultaneous interpreting exercise.

The following passage is a transcription from a videotaped speech delivered during a plenary session of the European Parliament:

*Want nogmaals, de huidige voorstellen met betrekking tot de structuurfondsen, die (1) wijzen erop dat landen met weinig doelstelling 1-gebieden die (2) bovendien nog eens niet meeprofiteren van de verschuiving in het landbouwbeleid dat die (3) voor de rekening van de uitbreiding opdraaien.*³

Besides its function as a relative pronoun, "die" is also a demonstrative pronoun, commonly used in spoken language to reinforce the sentence subject, as is the case in the above speech portion (*de huidige voorstellen, ... die wijzen erop*, the present proposals..., those very proposals indicate that...).

The pronoun was interpreted by the student in the booth as the introduction of a relative clause, which remained "hanging" in his rendition.

The second "die", introducing an embedded clause, was correctly interpreted as referring to "landen" (countries). However the third "die", used anaphorically as a demonstrative pronoun to reinforce the term "landen" and to indicate that "those particular countries" have to pay the price of the European Union enlargement (*voor de rekening van de uitbreiding opdraaien*), was a further source of ambiguity and consequently of incorrect reformulation:

Ancora una volta le attuali proposte riguardanti i fondi strutturali le quali indicano che i paesi... che indicano che i paesi con pochi settori dell'obiettivo 1 ... non traggono alcun profitto dal cambiamento della politica agricola... (omission).

Unlike the consecutive interpreter, the interpreter in the booth is never granted the privilege of requesting an explanation from the speaker. Therefore, the need to convey an intelligible message to the listeners forces the interpreter to reassemble the component parts of a speech and to introduce the necessary grammatical and lexical links in order to guarantee the coherence and cohesion of the target text according to the relevant target language parameters.

The interpretation of impromptu speeches provides students with an opportunity to develop these language reassembling strategies and to acquire the

3 (literally): Once again, the present proposals regarding structural funds ... those very proposals indicate that countries with few Objective-1 areas, which have not yet profited from the changes in agricultural policy, well, those are the very countries that have to pay the price of enlargement.

degree of detachment from the source-text syntax necessary for the reformulation of the message in the target language.

Conclusions

Until recently, the texts used to train interpreting students were selected according to the interpreting mode. Press articles were regularly used for practice and evaluation purposes in consecutive interpreting, whereas transcriptions of speeches (frequently from the Official Journal of the European Parliament) were read aloud for booth exercises and examinations.

This distinction between the training methodologies used for consecutive and simultaneous interpreting does not reflect real working conditions. In tutoring aspirant interpreters, attention need not be focused exclusively on the oral reformulation of written articles or carefully transcribed and edited speeches. Not all speakers are academics or politicians with the gift of eloquence and public speaking, perfectly in command of register subtleties, and the various situations in which an interpreter will be called upon to work throughout his/her professional career will undoubtedly require flexibility and the ability to adapt to various speech types.

Straniero Sergio (1999) states that in the training of interpreting students, priority is usually given to monologic texts, yet the practice of the interpreting profession demonstrates that the variety of communication settings calls for specific interpreting skills. In press conferences, debates, media events, interviews and round table discussions, the interpreter has to cope with heterogeneous speech and interaction patterns and with irregularities typical of impromptu spoken discourse.

In the case of aloud reading, the interpreter may have received a written copy of the speech in advance, yet he/she is unable to predict the fluency or speed of the delivery or the extent to which the speaker will change, omit or add passages to his script.

If interpreting training is as far as possible to reflect real-life conditions, the limits imposed by an academic setting can be overcome by alternating normal classroom practice (in which, inevitably, the teacher often plays the roles of both speaker and listener, Straniero Sergio 1998: 834) with sessions involving the collaboration of colleagues who are native speakers of the source language.

This may take the form of a lecture which students are asked to interpret for an audience who do not share the source language. Furthermore, the systematic organisation, in collaboration with other interpreting courses, of mock conferences reflecting some of the pragmatic aspects of orality and interlin-

guistic communication is another valuable means for evaluating students' performances in interpreting different types of speech acts.⁴

This paper suggests interpreting pedagogy might devote greater attention to the diversification of text typology and that including impromptu speeches (which are not necessarily easier for interpreters) in the training of interpreting students provides them with additional skills and improves their ability to adapt to a variety of intercultural communication settings.

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4 In March 1999, the interpretation courses of the Dutch and the Portuguese departments of the SSLMIT organised a mock conference on environmental issues in the Netherlands and Brazil, with the participation of Brazilian, Dutch and Italian speakers. The conference was videotaped for future practice sessions.

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