SELF-EVALUATION: THE AWARENESS OF ONE'S OWN DIFFICULTIES AS A TRAINING TOOL FOR SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

Simultaneous interpretation (SI) is currently being considered a 'black box' whose complex internal workings make it unsuitable for a single comprehensive explanatory model. Indeed, SI performance implies such a co-occurrence of skills and processes (cognitive, linguistic, emotional and behavioural) that many authors are rightly suggesting that investigations in the field be directed to the analysis of individual components (skill components, Moser and Lambert, 1994; with particular reference to memory, Darò, 1994; delivery quality, Viezzi, 1994; language-pair related difficulties, Snelling, 1992, Russo, 1990).

The present work is an attempt at breaking down the SI process into isolated features through an empirical approach in order to encourage SI students to analyse their performance, discover their weaknesses and strengths and channel their resources during the training period accordingly.

Materials and Methods

From the academic year 1988-89 to 1993-94, 135 questionnaires were submitted to students attending their first year of conference interpretation training at the SSLM of the University of Trieste. The questionnaire (see annex 1) is part of a wider project on a SI aptitude test started in 1989 (see Russo, 1989, 1990 and 1993) and is organized according to the following problem areas relevant to SI: COGNITION, EXPRESSION and EXPERIENCE. As the questionnaire consists of two parts (the first, side A, requesting a spontaneous enumeration of difficulties and comments by the student and the second, side B, containing 5 specific questions), two further problem areas have emerged from the students' own remarks: a well-defined one, EMOTIONS, and a more fuzzy one, here defined "OTHER" which includes aspects not mutually related and therefore not classifiable into one single category plus a few technical features.

The questionnaires were submitted according to the following procedure. At the beginning of their third year (corresponding at the SSLM to the first year of conference interpreting), the students recruited in the above-mentioned aptitude
test project were first asked to practice dual task exercises in order to become
familiar with the process of listening and talking at the same time. Then they
entered the booth where they had to "translate" a 5-minute political speech
simultaneously. The peculiarity of the test lies in the fact that the "translation"
is intra- and not interlinguistic: that is, they listened to an Italian speech which
they had to paraphrase in Italian. Soon after this exercise, the students had to
complete the questionnaires on their difficulties and impressions.

From the methodological viewpoint, it must be noted that despite the clear
indications provided, not all the students answered all the questions and,
conversely, several students answered more than one question when only one
was expected in a mutually exclusive set: that explains why the total of replies
does not always amount to 100% of respondents for each individual item.

Results

The highest number of positive replies was given to question 1 (side B)
concerning the dual-task nature of SI (111 yes against 21 no): it is difficult to
listen and speak simultaneously, but why? It would seem that the major
problem area regards the linguistic output (level of expression) rather than the
cognitive level (attention, concentration, processing, memory and
comprehension).

The data collected will be presented according to problem area, drawing from
both sides of the questionnaire simultaneously.

Expression

In ranking the sources of concern to the students in descending order of
importance, PARAPHRASING, namely conveying the same meaning using a
wording which differs from the original (question 1.3, side B) appears to be the
greatest challenge: indeed, 93 students (out of 116) reply that they find it
difficult. Side A of the questionnaire confirms the same data: out of 99 students
who spontaneously indicate difficulties in expressing themselves, 63 highlight
various features of paraphrasing. Breaking down this latter figure: 44 subjects
generally admit their difficulties in producing an autonomous speech rather than
repeating slavishly, especially as it seems hard to find synonyms and avoid
losing relevant information; 8 find difficulty in departing from the syntactical
structure of the source language (SL); 6 in finding equivalent expressions; 5 in
completing sentences.

FORM (question 1.2 ) is the second major source of concern for the students.
65 (out of 102 respondents) attribute their difficulties in speaking while
listening to their preoccupation with expressive form. Amongst the spontaneous
answers, 9 indicated the same problem, 5 of whom because of the consistent and
formally acceptable linguistic register requested, 2 because Italian does not “flow easily”, despite it being their mother tongue (in one case the student attended high school in GB and the other stated that it is a handicap of which she is daily aware) and 2 lack the equivalent language style (rhetorical, political or bureaucratic, etc.). To complete the data concerning expressive difficulties, from side A it emerges that: 15 have problems in SUMMARIZING (14 cannot manage to produce brief and concise statements and 1 cannot simplify entangled and redundant political language) and 12 have problems of CONTROL (7 on output with a view to ensuring a constant speech flow and correct syntactic and semantic relations, 2 on adequate timing to start speaking, 2 on continuing to speak without syntagmatic gaps or interruptions and, finally, 1 on producing the clearest possible message because she is aware of interpreting for somebody in that particular moment.

Cognition

The third reason why students find it difficult to perform this dual task exercise is linked to TEXT ANALYSIS problems. Analysis is an ambiguous term because it belongs to both the linguistic and cognitive levels and since the processing of incoming information proceeds not modularly but through simultaneous shifts between the different levels (morphosyntax, semantics, memory), reference may only be made to dominance of one processing level over the others (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981). In this respect, here analysis refers to a more general task with emphasis on the cognitive aspect (ranging from parsing to meaning detection and organization). 64 respondents against 45 (question 1.5) confirmed that the complex language surface structure had hampered decoding, even if, when asked for more information, it seems more a problem of memory retrieval than of parsing and comprehension as such, since some students considered difficult the memorization and reproduction of part of the sentence judged important when perceived: 54 against 39 (question 1.5.3). However, a considerable number of students had problems in gaining access to the meaning of the sentence (33 against 54, question 1.5.2) or in distinguishing between constitutive and secondary information items because they had been confused by the language form (23 against 54, question 1.5.1). One student, in particular, spontaneously declared that the fact that the SL was Italian made the analysis more difficult.

While text analysis ranks only third following difficulties of expression among the factors hampering this dual-task exercise, it is certainly the main problem of a cognitive nature encountered by the students.

Other typically COGNITIVE features of this dual task exercise such as memory, attention and processing of meaning emerged from the situations described; in particular, from the spontaneous remarks as many as 66 students (against the previous 99 concerning linguistic difficulties) freely expressed considerations related to this domain.
MEMORY ranks second. The background knowledge of the topic stored in the long-term memory of the subject (in our case, terrorism and terrorist attacks against civilians in Europe in the '80s) helped the students in their performance (86 against 36, question 3), however not quite to the point of anticipating the speakers' remarks (29 yes against 57 no, 1 partially, 1 did not remember, 1 did not know anything about it).

On side A of the questionnaire, 25 subjects mentioned their memory problems: 9 could not memorize the sentence well enough to reproduce it properly, 5 could not remember the beginning of their own sentences, 5 could not maintain an adequate décalage (for 4 it was too long and the information was consequently forgotten and for 1 it was not long enough to enable the desired reorganization of the incoming message), 2 could not remember the most suitable words, 2 could not remember the key elements necessary to provide a meaningful target language (TL) version, 1 could not recall the subject and 1 could not remember lists of words in long sentences.

ATTENTION ranks third amongst the sources of concern spontaneously expressed: 16 students have problems with it, 12 of whom in preserving the same attentive level without drops of concentration and 4 cannot pay attention to the subsequent sentence while already processing one or merely a chunk of meaningful information.

Another noteworthy aspect related to attention (in the sense of attention to the global meaning of the sentence) emerged from the replies to question 2 (side B) of the questionnaire. The recorded text had been partially manipulated in order to introduce a few well-known disturbing factors for SI: lists of words, numbers, gaps etc. The gap, in this case, occurred at syntagmatic level since from the S-V-O progressive sequence the verb was omitted and replaced by the sound of the speaker clearing her voice. As many as 19 students against 104 (almost one fifth) were actually unsettled by this slight interruption of the verbal flow and lost control of the sentence. 4 other students added that they did not remember the instance, evidently (and rightly, from the point of view of focusing on meaning in context and not just words) taking no notice of the event thus displaying the correct approach to SI.

COMPREHENSION of the meaning ranks fourth: 13 students indicate difficulties related to it, 7 of them in actually focusing on the meaning rather than mere words, 5 in grasping or following the global meaning (the macrostructure according to Kintsch and Van Dijk, in Mackintosh, 1985), 1 in grasping the really meaningful information while repeating quotations.

Information PROCESSING SPEED ranks fifth: 10 subjects have problems of this nature. 5 of them declare themselves too slow in processing and verbalizing concepts; 4 cannot keep up with the SL production rate; 1 stated that the information is so dense that there is not enough time to expand it properly.

Finally, 1 person declared his ignorance in the subject matter: knowledge in general (world or encyclopedic knowledge) is another cognitive aspect and therefore it seemed appropriate to mention it in this section.
Emotions

Another problem area that emerged from the spontaneous remarks concerns the EMOTIONAL level. 15 students declared that they were hampered by their emotional state: in particular, 10 said that they had to fight to overcome their emotions due to the "booth effect" (the earphones inhibited some of them) and a sense of fatigue and agitation; 2 wanted to be sure of having conveyed the key message; 2 were afraid of betraying the sense of the message and 1 was afraid to leave the sentences incomplete.

Other

From the unrelated remarks grouped together under the label of "OTHER" (5 replies in all): 2 expressed the need not to fall into the trap of over-anticipating the speaker's communicative intention; 2 were well aware that their "mind was divided" into three different parts: one searched for synonyms, one monitored the meaning of the TL and one checked the consistency of the subsequent sentence and the occurrence of new pieces of information; 1 stated that, given the novelty of the exercise, only at the end had she understood its purpose and begun to reformulate the incoming text.

Finally, still concerning question 1, some students attributed their difficulties in speaking and listening at the same time to TECHNICAL features such as voice overlapping (34 against 65, question 1.1) and SL speed (14 considered it fast against 84 who considered it right, 2 slow and 2 not adequate, question 1.4). From the spontaneous comments (only 2), 1 complained about the too loud volume (to the point of causing stunning) and 1 about background noises in the earphones.

Experience

To conclude, some information was collected about students' EXPERIENCE in the field.

In the questionnaire the last two points inquired into the students' personal experiences with similar exercises (question 4) and with SI in particular (question 5). As to question 4, 98 students had none, 8 some (5 shadowing, 1 memorization exercises, 1 sight translation and 1 did not specify). As to question 5, 52 had already tried it once or twice (except for one student who had already attended a formal training course) and 59 never.
Discussion

As expected, comprehension is not a factor that can be taken for granted in human communication and is language-independent. Indeed, as Steiner wrote as early as in the mid-seventies (G. Steiner, 1975: 47): “On the inter-lingual level, translation will pose concentrated, visibly intractable problems: but these same problems abound, at a more convert or conventionally neglected level, intra-lingually. The model 'sender to receiver' which represents any semiological or semantic process is ontologically equivalent to the model 'source-language to receptor-language' used in the theory of translation. In both schemes there is 'in the middle' an operation of interpretative deciphenment, an encoding-decoding function or synapse... In short: inside or between languages, human communication equals translation “.

From the self-evaluation carried out by the students this statement is confirmed: despite the fact that the SL and the TL were the same (Italian) and the level of comprehension was assumed to be homogeneous for all the 135 Italian mother tongue subjects, comprehension was not a marginal problem (46 of them, between replies and comments, referred to it).

In this case, impaired comprehension can certainly be explained by the extra processing burden on human resources ensuing from the competitive tasks implied by SI. However the very fact that there is a difference amongst the students' degree of performance has a two-fold implication. Firstly, from the point of view of aptitude to SI, it means that some will start their training course with greater ease in balancing their resources and secondly, from the point of view of the student, that the awareness of that specific weakness will imply sharpened attention and well-targeted personal effort, during the training course, to offset it.

From the results, however, it appears that the cognitive features implied by SI are less problematic than expression. In particular, paraphrasing poses the greatest challenge for students. When asked to process a verbal text and reproduce it on-line, they must inductively establish the semantic equivalence between the source and their target speech and this effort may impair their performance.

On the merits of paraphrasing as a way of highlighting students' linguistic and cognitive skills that are also relevant for code-switching practices, such as SL, more experiments are probably necessary to confirm this intuitive approach. It is however a fact that paraphrasing plays a central role in language activities as Catherine Fuchs wrote:

Nous rappellerons tout d'abord la place essentielle qu'occupe le paraphrasage parmi les activités de langage: pouvoir paraphraser, c'est témoigner que l'on maîtrise une (ou des) langue(s) en particulier, et la faculté de language en général... (Fuchs, 1982: 91).

In particular:
Qu’il s’agisse d’une langue maternelle ou d’une langue étrangère la capacité de paraphrasage est reconnue comme témoignant la maîtrise de cette langue; ceci est vrai aussi bien en production (aptitude à la reformulation paraphrasique) qu’en reconnaissance (aptitude à l’identification de variantes paraphrasiques). ...Ce lien reconnu entre capacité de paraphrasage et maîtrise linguistique explique le fréquent recours à des exercices de paraphrasage, tant dans la pratique des “techniques d’expression” que dans les méthodes d’apprentissage de langues étrangères: le phénomène paraphrasique est au cœur des préoccupations psycho- et sociolinguistiques. (ibidem: 91-92).

Paraphrastic structures and procedures have been widely studied (see Fuchs, 1982 and 1988) and therefore will not be dealt with in the present article. We shall only quote Fuchs’ closing remarks which epitomize their importance in language:

Nous avons essayé d’aborder le phénomène paraphrasique dans sa globalité, comme un phénomène homogène, quel que soit le niveau où se trouve établi le jugement d’identification sémantique (niveau du sens, de la référence, des valeurs pragmatiques ou des valeurs symboliques) (Fuchs, 1982: 177).

The objection could be raised that the great difficulties in paraphrasing were due more to the conditions under which the task was performed (time and morphosyntactic constraints) than to the task itself. This is certainly possible but, once again, the wide range of results originating from the same starting conditions among the 135 students and ranging from the total inability to react suitably, through the syntactic rearrangement of the same lexical units and glissement sémantique, to a successful overall paradigmatic and sintagmatic restructuring of the original sentences bear witness to the different degree of linguistic and non linguistic skills hitherto developed by the would-be interpreters recruited in this experiment. Since paraphrasing is a meaningful verbal indicator (see above) of the cognitive ability to understand and reproduce a message (unlike exercises such as shadowing during which repetition does not always entail comprehension, since each process involves a different functional area of the brain, see Luria quoted in Kurz, 1992), it seems likely that those who spontaneously and effortlessly show this ability to process a text stand a better chance when embarking upon a training course in SI whose main focus is the processing of meaning and not of words only. A word of caution is however in order at this stage since what makes a successful professional interpreter is not just the command of one language, which is why the final validation of the results obtained in this intra-linguistic aptitude test, namely if the promising would-be-interpreter will actually ever become an interpreter, depends basically, amongst other things, on his command of the other languages spoken. However important, the linguistic aspect of SI is not all because SI is a complex cognitive and linguistic task.
A single isolated remark shed light on the true nature of SI: its being a communicative event. One student described the importance of “being aware that one is interpreting and therefore aiming at producing the clearest and most concise message possible”. The insight of her being a link, a cultural mediator, an indispensable tool of communication places SI in the right perspective. All excessive concerns about form vanish and all resources are summoned to convey the speaker’s communicative intentions in the most comprehensible way to someone who is listening. This interactive dimension is often forgotten by SI students who practice for hours in the lab by themselves and often lose sight of the fact that they are actually speaking to someone who will react accordingly.

These results provide significant teaching implications. First of all, given the difficulties prevailing at the level of delivery, it seems appropriate to focus on the development of expressive, analytical and language transfer skills.

As to the first two aspects, especially in the preliminary stages, exercises of linguistic formulation of the SL like paraphrasing or oral summaries both intra- and interlinguistically, and improvised or prepared speech presentation seem very appropriate exercises.

But, in addition to the asset of mastering more languages, the real peculiarity of simultaneous interpreters lies in their transfer ability as Dillinger also demonstrated in his experiment on bilingualism vs interpreter professional competence (Dillinger, 1990). As far as transfer strategies are concerned, what Wilss considers the main purpose of the science of translation fits well the objectives of a SI training course:

The principal tasks of the science of translation are thus to develop operating procedures which will make it possible to factor the transfer from SLT to TLT against the background of the intended meaning in the SL, to organize the individual factors in a plausible frame of reference and extract from them a logical model of description and explanation, and to derive from the latter conclusions which can be applied from different points of view in translation theory or used in the descriptive and/or applied aspects of the study of language pairs.” (Wilss, 1982: 63)

Another important factor which may come into play in an interpreter’s performance are emotions. Fear, uncertainty, lack of confidence, nervousness, uneasiness are all feelings hinted at by several students (15). The curricula of a training course in SI does not envisage counselling, of course. Yet there must be room for encouraging the student to face and overcome his discomfort through greater command of the techniques. Self-confidence and performance are indeed mutually influential factors.
Conclusion

SI students are usually overwhelmed by the pressure and the demands of building up their professional competence at all levels simultaneously: they must read to keep abreast of current affairs in all countries of the languages spoken and to increase their vocabulary, listen to enhance their oral comprehension, practise memorization and text-analysis exercises to develop skills of analysis and summarizing, to name only a few daily activities. Perhaps a good starting point could be taking stock of one's own already developed cognitive and linguistic strategies. To this end any self-evaluating tool promoting this awareness becomes a valuable training tool because the students can channel their resources autonomously in a more economic and profitable way.

Similarly, trainers could focus their teaching efforts according to the specific needs manifested by a specific group of students and assign 'ad hoc' tasks.

As far as the questionnaire is concerned, I am aware of the methodological limit of having artificially separated areas whose borderline is not at all clearcut (the cognitive and linguistic levels are very often intertwined) and of having probably underrated other equally decisive factors, but schematization is often indispensable in order to highlight and ponder over the individual components of a complex task implying thorough investigation within a variety of relevant disciplines (psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, semiotics, etc.).

To conclude, the present empirical research offers only a small contribution to the screening of the difficulties entailed by speaking and listening simultaneously. It is based on the opinion of a limited student population and therefore no general rule can be drawn. It would be extremely interesting if others carried out similar surveys promoting self-evaluation and awareness amongst SI students with a view to enhance teaching strategies.
ANNEX 1: Translated version of the questionnaire

SIDE A
Name and Surname
First language
Second language
What difficulties have you experienced?

SIDE B
1. Did you find it difficult to go on listening and hence follow the incoming message? yes 111 no 21
   If yes
   1.1 because your voice covered the recorded voice: yes 34 no 65
   1.2 because you concentrated too much on expressive form: yes 65 no 37
   1.3 because you were restrained by the demands of trying not to repeat the same words of the original speech: yes 93 no 23
   1.4 because the text was not read at an adequate speed: slow 2 quick 14 right 86 no* 2
   1.5 because the length of the sentence and its complex syntax gave rise to problems: yes 64 no 45

   *in particular:
   1.5.1 the sentences are so confusing that one cannot distinguish between more and less important information: yes 23 no 54
   1.5.2 the message does not seem clear and therefore immediately accessible: yes 33 no 54
   1.5.3 it was difficult to remember that part of the sentence judged important when heard (problem of recall): yes 54 no 39

2. At some point you may have heard “to...ehm...terrorism”: has that missing word, hence that gap in the text, impaired the comprehension of the meaning of the sentence? yes 19 no 104 don't remember* 4

3. The knowledge of the subject matter has made the exercise easier: yes 86 no 36
   If yes, to the point of enabling you to foresee and therefore anticipate the speaker's remarks: yes 29 no 57 partially* I don't remember* I didn't know the subject matter* 1

4. Have you already done similar exercises?: no 98 yes 8 shadowing*5 memorization*I sight translation*1

5. Have you already interpreted simultaneously ?: yes 52 no 59
   *the replies in italics have been added by the students
References:


