APTITUDE TESTS AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING

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Introduction

The assessment of aptitudes with a view to their further development has always been a very difficult problem to solve in the selection of candidates for higher educational establishments, particularly if successful practising of the future profession requires a felicitous combination of specific skills, giftedness and erudition. The difficulties are the greater, the scantier our knowledge about the essential and subtler features of the activity the trainees are expected to practise after graduation.

Simultaneous Interpreting (SI) is a comparatively new profession and although a great deal has been done in the effort to untangle the knot and find out something about the process, we cannot boast of knowing enough to rest assured that our testing and training strategies do not need further investigation and improvement.

Dissatisfaction with some of the aptitude tests currently used has stimulated research in this area at some of the most advanced training centres for conference interpreters and translators. Most of the criticism is levelled at shadowing, with some authors expressing their misgivings about its reliability not only as a part of an entrance examination, but as a training exercise as well (e.g. Dodds, 1990), while others reject it as "a pointless and potentially harmful exercise" (Thiéry, 1990:4). The pros and cons of shadowing have also been discussed in great detail in Kurz (1992:245-50). But it is not her detailed review of the different opinions on the issue that is relevant for my discussion here. What is more important is her appeal to make our judgements in favour of or against, only by considering the "findings of research" (op.cit., p. 247) and to design our curricula and instruction strategies by applying "what new knowledge is available to us" (op.cit., p. 250).

In connection with this last quotation the legitimate question arises whether we have made full use of what we already know about SI. The answer, in my view, is that we have not.

Testing and Intertextuality in SI

An essential feature of SI about which knowledge has been gleaned from solid conference data (Alexieva, 1992b; 1992c), is associated with the relationships a single (micro-)text enters into with: (a) texts external to the conference (which I shall label as Intertextuality I) and (b) the remaining body of texts delivered at a conference (Intertextuality II), for a text does not occur alone, but occupies a certain position within the macro-text (Alexieva, 1985: 196).

Intertextuality I

The establishment of the intertextual relationships between a conference micro-text and texts outside the conference is extremely important for a felicitous realisation of the communicative act in SI for (a) it assists a better and easier understanding of the portions of the Source Language (SL) text relatable to previous sources of knowledge and experience, and (b) the easier processing of such segments allows the Interpreter to redistribute his attention and concentrate on what is entirely new. The efficiency of these operations depends, however, not only on the amount of knowledge the Interpreter has about the issues discussed at the conference, but also on his capacity instantaneously to identify the connection between the incoming information and that previously stored. In other words, an Interpreter must have a specific procedural knowledge and aptitude; for, without the knack to carry out the procedure of quick linking SL text segments with previous information, he cannot successfully cope with his task, even if the amount
of that information is vast.

This type of intertextuality is certainly valid for all types of translation (e.g. see Hatim and Mason, 1990: 120-137), as well as for the understanding of a text even without translation (Kristeva, 1969). But it acquires greater significance in the difficult conditions of SI, for here there is no possibility whatsoever to examine other texts for verification. The Interpreter can rely only on his talent instantaneously to recall the relevant information stored in his mind.

In the light of what has been said, then, perhaps we shall also have to reconsider the currently used "General Knowledge" Test\(^1\) and shift the accent from testing the amount of knowledge to testing the aptitude to handle that amount, which in turn seems also to be interconnected with the nature of the knowledge in terms of whether it is more comparable to "lists" of items or to more global structures, frames and scenario (Alexieva, 1992\(^a\); 221-9; Alexieva, 7.2.4, forthcoming 1993).

Intertextuality II

If with "Intertextuality I" the amount of previously stored knowledge can be the result of hard work rather than of a quick and serviceable memory, the intertextual relationships within the conference macro-text can be made to work for a better comprehension of the SL text and the production of an adequate version of the RL text, only if the Interpreter has a certain predisposition for such a procedural skill.

My assertion about the extreme importance of Intertextuality II and my suggestions about the way it works are based on the following type of evidence: (a) my experience as a simultaneous interpreter (i.e. on self-observation) and (b) a study of real conference macro-texts, enquiries held with experienced interpreters and tests with SI trainees. The results of this study may be summed up as follows (for detail, see Alexieva, 1992\(^b\)).

1) The most pervading type of intertextual relationship within the macro-text is that of overlapping, which leads to a high degree of intertextual redundancy;

2) Information from previous texts is retained, but it can be activated, identified and recalled if the interpreter hears a recurrence of it (complete or partial, verbatim or paraphrase), which acts as a stimulus facilitating recall;

3) Information from previous texts can be identified even on the basis of scanty material and if the beginning of the relevant segment unambiguously signals the recurrence, the interpreter may handle it as ready-made and, without any further processing, may transfer the interpretation from the first occurrence, which shows that what is retained is not surface structures, but rather content structures;

4) Prompt and correct identification, even when coupled with monitoring and comparing the retained with the recurrent, is a relief for the interpreter, for it allows him to redistribute his attention and focus it on what is entirely new.

Possible Assessment Strategies

From what has been said so far it becomes obvious that entrance examinations should include a test which would indicate whether the candidate has, or does not have, the aptitude to make a maximum and instantaneous use of the full capacity of his short-term memory.

The main characteristic feature of the assessment strategies I am suggesting is a contextualisation of the material given for translation, which entails a two-stage testing procedure.

Stage I

The purpose of Stage I is to supply a minimum co-text for the translation proper stage (Stage II). The candidates are offered a text of about 9-10 min (about 3 pages) via the auditory channel, for this will give an indication of their listening comprehension and retention capacities. A written "Stage I" version, however, is suggested if the second stage is in the spoken medium (see (3) Simultaneous Interpreting).

As far as its content structure is concerned, it should be predominantly an expository text meeting all textual standards, coherence and cohesion in particular, with about 9-10 easily discernible matrix-predications (roughly 1 per minute) in the expository part and a much smaller argumentative part, preferably towards the end, consisting of not more than two, maximum three, predications. In other words, an optimum text should have the structure 'A = "p_1...p_{10}" is the case' (expository part) and 'Since A, then q_1 and q_2 (q_3)' (the argumentative part, or the conclusion).

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1 Dissatisfaction with the way this test is organised has been expressed by other scholars, too, for example, see Gran and Taylor (1990:239).
Stage II

The second text should be a comment on the first one, i.e., the relationship between them should be as between a parent text (Stage I) and a daughter text (Stage II) (see Alexieva, 1992b). A good overlapping proportion can be attained if Text II is about 3-4 min, and contains maximum one third of the expository part of Text I (e.g. "p₁, p₄ and p₅") and a different argumentative part, i.e. "q₁ and -q₂", or "q₄ and q₅".

The main purpose of Stage II, as far as the Analysis Phase is concerned, is to see: (a) whether the relevant portions from the first text have been retained and whether their recall is easy and prompt; (b) whether what is recalled is properly linked with the new argumentative context, for the evaluation is "-q", and not "q", and (c) to what extent recall of retained information facilitates the analysis of what is novel.

As regards the reproduction of Text II by means of the Receptor Language (RL), the following three major versions of Stage II can be suggested:

1) Identification of recurrent and new information

The instruction given to the candidates is to listen to Text II (in their "B" language) without taking notes and after it is over to write down (in their "A" language") the information repeated from Text I in Text II and then state the difference(s) in the argumentative part (comments, conclusions, etc.). However, the text produced following these instructions is not a translation proper of Text II, for it will contain an additional comment-like portion, resulting from the comparison of the two texts.

This version of Stage II is easier, for there is no simultaneity of activities here and the focus is on the assessment of the capacity of the short-term memory, although there is the additional possibility for testing listening comprehension in language "B" and fluency in the production of a written text in language "A" with strictly predetermined semantic and pragmatic parameters.

2) Sight Translation

Sight Translation, however, seems to be a better option for Stage II, since in this case the testing situation is much closer to a real SI setting than the previous version, because of the simultaneity of activities. The difference lies mostly in the nature of the Analysis Phase, for the SL text is written and the channel of its reception is the visual, which makes it easier for the candidates, for the eye can take in much larger textual segments than the ear and can even "remember" more, particularly with people who have a good "visual" memory.

Sight Translation by itself, i.e. without Stage I - the preliminary facilitating reception of a longer text interrelated with it in the same way as texts are related in a real conference - has already been recognized as a more solid basis for the assessment of candidates' aptitudes (e.g. Dodds, 1990: 19). However, I do not share the apprehensions of some scholars (Dodds, 1990, included) concerning the reliability of tests ensuing from the fact that the candidates are accustomed to translation in the written medium and do their sight translation with the usual hesitations, repetitions and corrections of already given versions, typical of the translation of an unknown written text. Certainly, one cannot expect that the candidates give a professional "Sight Translation", i.e. produce a fluent RL text version without any hitches. But in spite of the negative transfer of "written translation practice" into "spoken translation" typical of the candidates' performance because of their lack of experience in translating in the spoken medium, Sight Translation, particularly in the version providing a minimum contextualisation by means of Stage I, can provide the examiners the opportunity to find out whether a candidate has:

(a) A serviceable short-term memory promoting instantaneous identification and recall of previously received information;

(b) Procedural aptitudes for the distribution of attention on the simultaneous performance of at least two activities, and, more specifically, for prompt decision-making in the analysis of the SL text and the production of the RL text; and last, but not least,

(c) The necessary level of command of language "B" in terms of listening comprehension (Stage I) and reading comprehension (Stage II), and of language "A" as the means of producing the RL text.

The version of Sight Translation suggested here is a very good combination of short-term memory testing and an assessment of the other aptitudes a simultaneous interpreter must possess. The minimum contextualisation provided by Text I, Stage I, received via the auditory channel, with an optimum overlapping proportion of three to one between Text I and Text II, creates better
"reception" and "analysis" conditions for the candidate, conducive to eliminating at least part of the hesitations, repetitions and corrections that may occur as a result of total lack of context.

3) Simultaneous Interpretation
The only clear-cut and well defined objection to including a real SI test in the entrance examinations I have heard so far from its opponents is that it is an activity the candidates have never performed before, therefore conclusions cannot be drawn about their aptitudes on such a basis. This objection, however, sounds rather strange, coming from scholars and SI instructors advocates of shadowing, summary-writing and sight translation, for the latter also seem to be novel activities for the candidates in many European countries at least such is the situation in Bulgaria and we do not seem to be an exception, e.g. see Dodds' comment on the lack of summary-writing classes in Italy (Dodds, 1990).

Therefore, as far as the "novelty" of the activity is concerned, the currently widely used tests have nothing more to recommend them and are also at a disadvantage. They are at an even greater disadvantage, since through them one can test the candidates' aptitudes in the performance of activities which are close to SI, but substantially differ from it along some very important parameters, for example, the mechanical nature of listening and speech repetition in shadowing, which has already been discussed, can be hardly compared to the reception and analysis of the SL text and production of the RL text in SI; the degree of compression and its nature in summary writing is closer to consecutive rather than to simultaneous interpreting, etc. etc. (see Alexieva, 7.2.5., forthcoming 1993).

All of which reveals that the lack of an SI proper test may lead to an inaccurate assessment of the candidates' aptitudes. In fact, the best way to see if somebody has a talent for acting is to make him, or her, act, certainly, not make them do Hamlet or Lady Macbeth, but something much simpler - recite a poem or perform a sketch. So perhaps, we can also offer our candidates a bit of the "real thing" but a simpler version of it. What I mean is that we can ask them to interpret a text simultaneously, but under the easiest possible conditions and with lower performance requirements, namely:

(a) The text itself should have all the optimum parameters (Alexieva, 1992®), i.e. high degree of redundancy, well-balanced and coherent semantic structure provided with good cohesive links, prevalence of simpler, one-domain iconic models, simpler syntax and absence of specific terminology;

(b) It should be delivered at an average (closer to lower) speed, with standard pronunciation, well-marked prosody and optimum pausation after meaningfully complete segments;

(c) The text should be supplied with a minimum co-text, i.e. it must be contextualised, similarly to the way it is in a real SI situation. This can be achieved by including the SI text as Stage II of the assessment strategy suggested here, with an optimum overlapping proportion of three to one between Text I (Stage I) and Text II (Stage II) the latter being the text to be simultaneously interpreted. My experience also shows that another way of making it easier for candidates to cope with this novel, complex activity is by giving a written text at Stage I, for reading facilitates retention of information and its subsequent recall because firstly, there can be a play-back, (that is, one can re-read a passage) and secondly, the eye can also remember, so visual memory can help in the reception and analysis of the second text given for simultaneous interpreting at Stage II.

(d) A strict system of assessment should be elaborated, to make allowances for a certain number and type of mistakes and impose penalty points for misinterpreting matrix predications and more global structures.

Conclusions
1) The Two-Stage Strategy suggested here can help us test a very important aptitude for Simultaneous Interpreting and it is the aptitude for a prompt and accurate recall of information retained from previously received texts.

2) The minimum contextualisation it ensures for Text II makes it possible to employ an SI proper test as Stage II, which, if certain requirements concerning the selection and delivery of Text II are observed and if certain allowances are made in the evaluation, can give us more reliable evidence about the candidates' aptitudes.

3) A proper selection of the two texts along the parameters: number of matrix predications, ratio between the expository and the argumentative predications and the observation of the "three-to-one" overlapping relationship between Text I and Text II, can give the examiners the opportunity more accurately to assess the candidates'
performance in quantitative terms.

4) All three versions of the Two-Stage Testing work extremely well as efficient training exercises, too. As part of an entrance examination, however, it is the Sight Translation and, particularly, the Simultaneous Interpreting versions that provide a possibility to glean more information about the candidates' aptitudes relevant for SI.

References


