INTERPRIT - CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETATION MODULE

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David and Margareta Bowen have said:

It is time to lay the ghost of interpreter's notes, burying it at midnight, at a
crossroads with a wooden stake through its heart (Bowen and Bowen,
1984: 22).

Were it to be taken literally, so pitiless a verdict would sign the death
warrant of any propaedeutic program for would-be interpreters aimed at
enhancing their note-taking skills. Back in its original context, however, the
provocative nature of the above-quoted statement emerges: no radical
condemnation of any memory-aiding device in consecutive interpreting training;
just a colourful warning against the deleterious habit of considering notes an end
in themselves and the "unwarranted fascination" that fanciful symbols hold for
the average student interpreter. Not only is the ancillary role of notes repeatedly
stressed by the two authors, but a nearly absolute freedom in the development of
a personal note-taking technique is also advocated. The common denominator of
this widely represented school of thought is precisely the strong opposition
expressed by all its exponents to teaching note-taking as a standardized, valid-
for-all system. Historically, the non-prescriptive approach grew as a response to
an over-zealous application of the basic principles for note-taking - "indications
générales" (Herbert, 1952: 33) - as set out in the pioneering works of Jean
Herbert and Jean-François Rozan. At the other end of the spectrum is the
highly-structured system of non-verbal, language-independent note-taking
"sprachunabhängige Notation" - taught on a monolingual course in German by
Heinz Matyssek to his student interpreters in Heidelberg and based on the
extensive use of symbols.

If I have given this sketchy overview at the outset of my paper, it is neither to
enter the debate nor to take sides, as my lack of experience in the teaching of
interpreting ill-equis me to make such a move. Instead, my intention is to
demonstrate that, both in its scope and its intended users, my module tackles the
controversial question of note-taking from a different and, in some ways, safer
perspective. In this respect, the words of John Matthews are illuminating:

The second stage of consecutive interpretation - i.e. note-taking - is the
most debated. Opinion here is split between the teaching of a system (…)

and the non-teaching of one (...) But even here there is general consensus on a good many points. The most important ones are 1) the interpreter must make an objective analysis of the text as a prerequisite to note-taking, and 2) note-taking is seen as an aid to memorisation and not a substitute for it. (...) If there is a general body of agreement that discourse analysis is the basics of interpretation, then surely it cannot be so difficult to find some consensus on the practical application of that theoretical framework. As regards the two basic approaches to the teaching of consecutive interpretation, the non-dirigiste and the plus-dirigiste, I have suggested that both serve a purpose. The teaching of a systematic method of note-taking to be retained in the early stages of a training course (...); the insistence on and encouragement of a personal mnemonic system (...) as a long-term objective (Matthews, 1984: 87-90).

For the purpose of this paper, the key-concepts to be retained here are: discourse analysis and early stages of a training course.

As is widely known, the area of discourse analysis is concerned with the study of how language functions in human interaction. Central to this investigation is the notion of text defined by De Beaugrande and Dressler as a "communicative occurrence" which can be made manifest in sound or print (De Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981: 3).

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**DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

MACRO - PROCESSING
(user-centered analysis)

- situational context
- producer's intentions
- receiver's assumptions
- world knowledge

TEXT

MICRO - PROCESSING
(text-centered analysis)

- cohesion
- coherence
Communicative occurrences can be analysed from two different, yet complementary perspectives: a user-centred and a text-centred one. For the sake of simplicity, and without resorting to De Beaugrande and Dressler's systematic description of the seven standards of textuality, I will refer to these two levels of analysis as: macro-processing and micro-processing. Though the terms have been borrowed from Margaret Lang (Lang, 1992: 206), here their respective semantic content has been slightly redefined. While macro-processing has to do with all the extralinguistic factors which have a bearing on the act of communication, namely: the situational context (participants, date, place and occasion), the producer's intentions (determining the purpose or function of the text), the receiver's assumptions and expectations, and the world knowledge of both (i.e. the relevant part of their stored encyclopedic knowledge), micro-processing is concerned with the syntactic-semantic analysis of text constituents, such as cohesion and coherence.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the extralinguistic level, attention will be focused here on the latter kind of analysis, not out of an unpardonable underestimation of the other component - the significance of which will be fully recognised in the following - but because of its more direct relevance for the note-taking element of the module.

A study of the literature on the didactics of consecutive interpretation proves Matthews right: while emphasising that a correct comprehension of the source text is vital for the transfer of meaning from one language to the other, all the authors seem to indicate, more or less explicitly, that logical analysis is a useful and effective tool for students in the early stages of their training.

On this point Jean Herbert's suggestions are unequivocal: "As far as possible, the interpreter should carry out a logical analysis of the discourse as it unfolds and take her/his notes accordingly" (Herbert, 1952: 34, our translation). This kind of analysis, which calls for a classification of the main elements of the text, is a complex operation which the student is well advised to practise over and over again. It is interesting to note that one of the preparatory exercises suggested by Herbert is the "transcription" of a written text into "interpreter's notes", clearly and logically laid out on paper.

For Patricia Longley, logical analysis is by far the most valuable method to help students find "how many or how few notes they require and how to lay them out so that salient points stand out (…) and the thread of logic, the connections between one idea and the next, is clearly perceived by them" (Longley, 1978: 50). In the early stages, this is achieved through exercises in which notes may only be taken after short intervals of speech, so as "to force the students to rely on analysis, on memory and to learn to summarise only the essential in note form." (ibid).
Starting from the observation that - as Ana Ballester and Catalina Jiménez put it - what is required of students in courses of interpreting is "to take in the meaning of a text, to isolate the sense units, to organize them, (...) and also at the same time to abide by the logical coherence and the linguistic cohesion of the original" (Ballester and Jiménez, 1992: 238), one can only wonder at the few practical guidelines offered to beginners to achieve all this and, I should add, the relatively little attention or insufficient amount of time devoted to preliminary exercises of the above-mentioned kind.

This introduction, has aimed at providing a theoretical and authoritative basis for an idea which both my studies and training at the School for Interpreters and Translators in Trieste and, more recently, my work as a research assistant and evaluator of TELL products at the University of Hull have combined to shape. On the one hand, my experience as a student made me aware of the need to extend practice sessions beyond the regular class hours - a problem which has been identified as one of "lack of contact time" and which is no "prerogative" of any one academic establishment - and, consequently, the need to offer some kind of guidance to students, who are left to themselves in what is the most demanding qualitative leap of all: the transition, at the end of their second year, from general language learning to interpreting skills acquisition and development.

On the other hand, my involvement in some of the learning activities of modern languages degree students, finalists in particular, has convinced me that substantial benefits would accrue to them from a deeper understanding of the rules which account for the internal structuring of discourse. Many of my colleagues with a lot more experience in the language teaching profession than myself will confirm the lamentable lack of familiarity with grammatical concepts and terminology which can be observed in students even at the more advanced stages of their curriculum. Now that the focus in the pedagogy of foreign languages has finally and most successfully shifted from the largely discredited grammar-translation method - with its rote-learning of rules and its exclusive use of written texts - to a communication-oriented one, the underlying danger is to encourage students in their belief that they have done away, once and for all, with all instruments of linguistic analysis and description. With no such theoretical framework, the learning process, bereft of vitality and scope, is bound to become a much more limited and, in the long term, less interesting activity.

If grammar plays so important a role in my module - as we shall presently see - it is not out of a wilful display of nonconformism, rather out of the firm conviction that a new approach might overcome the students' resistance. I am referring here to the innovative concept of "communicative grammar" as illustrated by Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik:
A Communicative Grammar of English is a new kind of grammar. In writing it, we have assumed that studying grammar (...) makes most sense if one starts with the question 'How can I use grammar to communicate?'. The book is intended primarily for the fairly advanced student (...). If you are such a student you will have studied English grammar in one form or another already, but here we offer you a new perspective on the subject, which relates grammatical structure systematically to meanings, uses and situations. In this way we hope you will improve and extend the range of your communicative skill in the language (Leech and Svartvik, 1975: 10).

Before proceeding to the description of the module, a few conclusions need to be drawn from the above:

firstly, it is fairly evident that, albeit not identical, the domains of "discourse analysis" and "communicative-functional grammar" largely overlap;
secondly, by bringing them to your attention, emphasis has been explicitly given to the concept of "communicative competence", which is precisely the main pedagogical objective of the programme;
lastly, the classification of the module's intended users into two separate categories - student interpreters in the early stages of their training on the one hand, and modern languages degree students in their final year on the other - is, for all practical purposes, immaterial.

To avoid possible misunderstandings, let me clarify what is meant here by "consecutive interpretation module".

The choice of a name for the application was no easy one. If the titles: "module 2", "advanced module" and "advanced interpreting module" seemed either too generic or far too pretentious, the adoption of the label "consecutive interpretation module" was no less risky. The false, though fully justified expectation might be created that what the package offers is some practice in consecutive interpreting, where the proposed activity, precisely for its preparatory nature and its broader, less specific scope, bears but a faint resemblance to the "real thing".

What, then, is required from professional consecutive interpreters and what, instead, is the exercise students are asked to perform in the TASK screen of my module?
The process of consecutive interpretation (COLUMN ON THE LEFT) consists of two distinct phases: listening to a speech sequence of several minutes and reformulation of its content into the target language. In a theoretical model, as the one being shown, the former phase can be broken down into the following operations: acoustic perception of sounds, analysis - i.e. comprehension of the main concepts, identification of logical connections, and selection of key-words - and note-taking. Operations which, I reiterate, are not separate steps, but occur simultaneously in the first stage of the interpreter’s performance.

What I have attempted to do in the TASK screen of the module (COLUMN ON THE RIGHT) is to separate, so far as possible, the basic components of the processing stage, so as to allow students to practise them, not in total isolation from one another, but at least in a simpler context than that of the global task of consecutive interpretation. Clearly, from a pedagogical point of view, the most important division is between analysis (phases 1 and 2) and note-taking (phase 3). But let us see how this translates into practice.
The module consists of a background reading option plus 5 effective screens:
1. preliminary questionnaire
2. task
3. self-assessment
4. reinforcement questionnaire, and
5. conclusion.

The sequence of activities broadly follows the main stages of a discourse analysis process, from a general introduction to the situational context and subject-matter of the speech, through to a close investigation of the main textual components. Navigation in the module is in a linear fashion with an intermediate and optional loop after the self-assessment screen, where the student can return to the task screen to interpret the speech a second time.

Main Menu

Items in the main menu will show in pairs: one speech in Italian and one in English for each topic. The duration of speeches will be gradually lengthened, while their degree of technicality is increased according to a widely followed pedagogical practice, which recommends introducing students to narrative texts before exposing them to the more demanding argumentative and descriptive ones. At present, the module contains only one speech in Italian.

Background Information

This screen, which is only accessible from the main menu, contains background information on the speech - i.e. a written description of the situation (who speaks to whom, about what, when, where and why) and further reading material. Students can highlight those terms or concepts which they think are likely to be useful for the actual interpreting task. Once this stage has been completed, students move on to the first screen.

Screen 1 - Preliminary Questionnaire

A dialogue box prompts the students to choose which half of the speech they wish to interpret. For obvious reasons, they are strongly recommended not to attempt the second half before interpreting the first.
In this screen, students can listen to an oral description of the situation, which is a spoken version of the text appearing in the background information. A preliminary questionnaire on the as yet unknown text is then presented, with the aim of activating and enhancing the mental processes of inference and presupposition which play so large a part in the interpreting task. Students are required to type in answers for subsequent reference and revision. Five areas are explored: text function, level of language, subject-matter and related topics, speaker's stance and student's background knowledge.

Screen 2 - Task

Upon entering the task screen, students are invited to select a set of interpreting symbols and/or mnemonics which will be mapped on to function keys and buttons for the duration of the exercise. The range of "logical links" offered is by no means exhaustive. Only the most recurrent ones have been included, namely: cause, purpose, result, concession, addition, alternative and contrast. Much more important are, however, the underlying methodological principles which the students are expected to assimilate and apply, that is:

1. logical linking between one idea and the next is what differentiates an unconnected string of sentences from a well-constructed text; and
2. the same concept must be noted with the same graphical sign, irrespective of the words used to express it.

The 4 alternatives supplied for each function are among the most commonly used by interpreters. Their order of precedence is as follows:
symbols
English mnemonics
Italian mnemonics
mnemonics in Latin, French or German.

Once the choices have been made and the window dismissed, the central task begins. Vocabulary for the selected half of the speech is available at two distinct points: before the students start to listen to the speech and before they start to interpret it. At all other times the vocabulary button will be disabled. The speech is divided into sequences of two or three sentences each, which students can play up to three times. Ideally notes should be taken at the end of the first or second listening, while the third, optional listening should be exclusively used to check figures and names.
The note-taking field is divided into four columns:
column 1 is for logical links (conjunctions and adverbials, when the latter are in
front-position, i.e. come before the subject);
column 2 is for subjects and, occasionally, vocatives;
column 3 is for verb groups; and
column 4 is for objects, complements and adverbials in end-position.

As the dotted lines indicate, the functions of the last three columns are not
rigid.
Students will use the TAB key to move down across the columns and the
RETURN key to move down within a column, thereby applying two of the most
widely recommended principles for note-taking, i.e. diagonal arrangement of
notes (technically "décalage") and vertical listing of analogous elements of a
clause. The end of a sentence will be marked by a solid horizontal line in the
first column. The EDIT menu in the bar at the top of the screen allows students
to rearrange their notes, by cutting, copying and pasting them. No more than one
page should be used for each sequence of the recorded speech.

Once the speech has ended students are required to record an interpretation
based on their notes. No PAUSE button is envisaged at this stage and the
recording time will be limited (in the ratio of 1.5:1 with relation to the length of
the original speech). This is to prevent the student from spending too much time
on deciphering the notes, which would result in a fragmented and unnatural
rendering of the original speech.

Screen 3 - Self-assessment
In this screen students will be able to listen to the interpretation they have
just recorded and, at the same time, switch between three windows: one
containing their own notes, one our notes and the third a transcript of the
original speech. Once the self-assessment is over, students are given the option
of going back to the task screen for a second attempt, or moving on to the
reinforcement screen.

Screen 4 - Reinforcement
The purpose of this screen is to guide students through a more detailed
analysis to a deeper understanding of the original text. Whereas the first 4
questions are identical in content to those of the Preliminary Questionnaire,
points 5 to 8 are meant to focus the students' attention on thematic structure,
syntactic patterns, technical vocabulary and rhetorical devices. Answers to the
Preliminary Questionnaire and the transcript of the original text can both be
accessed from this screen.
Screen 5 - Conclusion

Two windows are available here. One contains the transcript of the speech broken up into thematic paragraphs and preceded by succinct indications of text type and level of formality - occurrences of technical vocabulary and rhetorical devices are marked. The other displays a possible translation of the text, a spoken version of which is equally available.

And now to the most important question which, at the end of this presentation, still needs to be dealt with, namely: why use the computer when the more traditional and, no doubt, much more flexible note-pad might be the ideal candidate for the job? I will answer by drawing your attention not so much to the well-known and highly praised advantages of this learning tool as, precisely, to its most manifest weaknesses, which the rationale of the present module has turned into valuable pedagogical strengths. While the default layout of the note-taking field acts as a constant reminder to students to go beyond the surface structures of the source text and carry out operations of syntactic de-structuring and simplification, the small size of the page and the consequent narrowness of columns invite concision and the extensive use of abbreviations. But, most importantly, the keyboard, unlike the pen, may prove a powerful deterrent for students, who will be much more inclined to wait until the sequence is over to take notes, thus relying on memory and avoiding scribbling down whatever words they hear.

With reference to the thorny issue of the lack of interpersonal contact in a language teaching programme especially designed to increase the students' communicative competence, the problem is a real one and it would be senseless to deny it. Yet, alternative uses to the self-access mode could be devised to make up, albeit partially, for this major shortcoming.

If, as Danica Seleskovitch explains, no machine will ever be able to replace the human mind in performing translation and interpretation tasks, "not because there are doubts as to the intended meaning of words or phrases, but because the resulting translation of such words and phrases would fail to carry sense in the other language" (Seleskovitch, 1978: 341), computers can, at least, make a tiny, unpretentious contribution to training students to grasp sense and render the ideas behind the words.
Bibliography


