

TESTING APTITUDE FOR SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION: EVALUATION OF THE FIRST TRIAL AND PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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Introduction

While fully acknowledging that the performance of a professional conference interpreter is the result of the interplay of a variety of factors, some of which go beyond the scope of the present research (cultural background, linguistic competence in the foreign language and in one's own mother tongue, motivational and behavioural factors, impact of the training course, to name a few), it seemed, nevertheless, challenging to focus on and assess certain skills deemed relevant as pre-requisite to an interpreting task: namely logical-cognitive skills and linguistic abilities *latu sensu*.

To this end, during the academic year 1988-'89, a specifically devised experiment was carried out at the Scuola Superiore per Interpreti e Traduttori of the University of Trieste (for a detailed presentation of the aptitude test proposed, see Russo in *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, n. 2, Università degli Studi di Trieste, 1989), aiming at highlighting the text-processing strategies of subjects under conditions simulating a simultaneous interpreting task.

Experimental procedure and analysis criteria

Twenty second-year students took part in the experiment. (They had never engaged in simultaneous or consecutive interpretation before).

The test consisted of a simultaneous paraphrasing from Italian into Italian of an oral text, after a little practise in the new task of listening and speaking at the same time. This intra-linguistic

performance avoided error variables attributable to code-switching difficulties. Furthermore, the subjects formed a homogenous group in that they all spoke Italian as their mother tongue and therefore the level of linguistic competence (in Italian) was assumed to be the same for all students, thereby eliminating the interference of uncontrolled variables from the evaluation of the performances.

All the students subjected to the aptitude test proposed later began the two-year training course in simultaneous and consecutive interpretation. One of these students, however, subsequently left Trieste without starting his third year, thus leaving a sample group of 19 subjects.

The twenty performances were examined on the basis of five positive and five negative criteria, each scoring +1 and -1 respectively. In the case of several negative criteria all present in one of the main nuclei into which the text was broken down, as for instance, semantic error and loss of cohesion, an overall negative score of -1 was given. Similarly, an overwhole positive score of +1 was assigned in the opposite case, unless a particular skill needed stressing.

The following criteria were adopted:

- 1) application of macrorules to the incoming segments of information: (+1)
 - for semantic abstraction via construction (SA): any single piece or sequence of pieces of information may be replaced or conceptualized by one item denoting a global fact of which they are constituents (ie: bricks, cement, wall-> house);

- for semantic abstraction via generalisation (Ge): any single piece or sequence of pieces of information may be replaced or conceptualized by a general item denoting an immediate superset (ie. in June, July and August-> during Summer).
- 2) (+1) For active storage in short-term memory (AS) of incoming linguistic occurrences so as to facilitate their processing with subsequent permutation of the sentence segments during the message output.
- 3) (+1) For syntactic and/or semantic anticipation ability.
- 4) (+1) For paradigmatic replacement of a phrase (PR) (ie. "The response of the European Parliament"-> "The stance taken up by the European Parliament").
- 5) (+0.5) For ability to detect and modify a paradigmatic structure.
- 6) (-0.5) For deletion (De) of a main nucleus (noun phrase and modifiers) or of an important secondary nucleus (specification, etc.). Advisable deletion (AD) implies deletion of an unimportant secondary nucleus.
- 7) (-0.5) For form-linked errors (Fo) of various types including style imperfections, wrong collocations, violations of combinatory constraints or grammar mistakes, provided the comprehension of the output text is not compromised.
- 8) (-1) For loss of cohesion (CL): wrong reproduction in the target text of the grammatical links to the extent of rendering its content difficult to make out (i.e. incorrect concord of subject and verb separated by an embedded sentence).
- 9) (-1) For loss of coherence (CoL): the text produced by the subject lacks internal logical links between the pieces of information thus rendering the text world reconstructed by the receiver incomplete and lacking consequential and informative aspects. This is the cause and at the same time the effect of the previous condition.
- 10) (-1) For semantic error (SE): the comparison between the source and target texts shows that original pieces of information have been replaced by incorrect ones (including misinterpretation).

The following features were also taken into consideration:

- 11) length of the performance, ie. 12/12 sentences

(+1).

- 12) Fulfilment of the task without breaks (+1).

13) deletion of a whole sentence: (-1) for each deleted sentence.

- 14) Fulfilment of the task with breaks: (-1) for each request to stop the taperecorder and consequent break.

Results

In March 1992 the sixth exam session was completed thereby officially concluding the last year of training. Students who had not yet completed the course within that specified time-limit, however, are still entitled to do so, but they are considered "fuori corso" students, i.e. they will sit their exams after the prescribed period.

Bearing in mind the specific purpose of the research study, namely establishing whether there is any meaningful correlation between the score obtained in the suggested aptitude test and the positive or negative academic performance of would-be interpreters, a preliminary evaluation of this first experimental set of students may now be attempted.

In order to compare these two values, namely the test score vis-à-vis the overall performance, the latter was taken into account making no distinction as to the foreign language chosen (French, English, German, Spanish or Russian) and the type of examination passed by the student (consecutive or simultaneous interpretation, to or from the foreign language).

In this preliminary assessment, the following features were considered:

A) The number of students who have completed the course (or are about to do so) and that of those who have abandoned it.

B) The average mark of each student throughout the two-year course.

C) The success rate, expressed via the difference between the exams which students sat and those actually passed.

D) The number of exams already passed out of the total number envisaged by the curriculum.

and consequently;

E) The number of sessions effectively needed to complete the course.

As far as point A is concerned, from the group of students scoring ≥ 0 at the proposed aptitude test

only one has so far abandoned the course (8 of the original 9 students remain); whereas the second group (test score < 0) has experienced a 50% abandonment rate (the number of students still attending the course going from 10 down to 5).

With respect to points B, C, D and E, upon examining each individual variable vis-à-vis the test score, the most positive and statistically significant correlation has proved to be that between the test score and the number of exams successfully taken, $r(12) = 0.563$, $p < .03$. In other words, the error probability of the aptitude test is of 3 out of 100 cases.

Conclusion

These preliminary results highlight that, theoretically, the proposed test has a reasonably accurate predictive value as to the time effectively needed by the student to master interpretation techniques and develop the necessary professional skills to complete the course.

A certain tendency would seem to be apparent, but extreme caution is called for before asserting the reliability of the aptitude test under study, given the small sample of subjects available. At present, the same test has been applied to two other sets of students (now attending their first and second year of the training course respectively). Hitherto there has been no test of this nature specifically devised for such purposes; therefore only supplementary data will, in due course, provide wider-ranging evidence in favour of or against the validity of the model developed.

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