SOME LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS THAT INFLUENCE THE PERFORMANCE OF SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETERS

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Spoken language allows us to communicate with others: to express our ideas in words and to have a means of comprehending others' reactions to what we say. But what happens when two people don't share a set of language symbols to represent concepts and objects? Whenever this is the case, the communication chain, which normally only requires a speaker and a hearer for interaction, cannot function without an interpreter who possesses two sets of linguistic symbols and who can bridge the "language gap".

The interpreter adds a dimension to the typical communication diagram, for he is not only a transmitter, but a channel and a receiver, as well. He "hears and speaks", but not in the usual way, because he "speaks" (ideally) exactly what he "hears". What's more, he is not the speaker's intended audience; rather, he is used by the speaker to reach an audience that, in any other situation, would be unavailable to him.

To understand how the interpreter can function in these very different roles, it is important to understand how the simultaneous interpreter does his work, what processes are involved. We can say that simultaneous interpretation takes place in roughly four stages:

Stage 1. LISTENING: perception of sounds; acoustic decoding.

Stage 2. COMPREHENSION: grasping the sense of the sounds; message decoding.

Stage 3. TRANSLATION: transformation of the sense into the corresponding linguistic units of another language; message encoding.

Stage 4. PHONATION: articulation, production of the new speech utterance; message transmission.

It is not certain at which stage of simultaneous interpretation the association of the data presented to the mind actually does occur. Corresponding words of both languages may very well be associated directly, without any concept of the object being formed, i.e. without any conscious comprehension taking place. Some fascinating psycholinguistic studies have been done on storage and retrieval of linguistic units in general and, in particular, on whether simultaneous interpreters momentarily store the information in the incoming language and translate it a split second before sound emission or if only the word image and not the word itself is stored and automatically retrieved in the other language for encoding. There is no doubt, however, that Stage 1, and perhaps Stages 2 and 3 as well, occur when Stage 4 is not yet over. In other words, the interpreter has to listen whenever the speaker is talking, even though he is still busy producing the translation of the previous sentence. Opinions differ about the duration of this overlapping period, but there is no doubt that the quality of a simultaneous interpretation depends largely upon the ability of the interpreter to carry out these two linguistic activities simultaneously. There can be no good translation if the interpreter cannot manage the feat of listening at the same time he himself is talking.

Here we can bring in the concepts of error, redundancy and feedback, to relate them and some other factors to simultaneous interpretation. An interpreter's errors can be caused by both decoding and encoding malfunctions. In normal speech, we seldom deviate from our own particular pattern of speech (except for occasional slips of the tongue, etc.) but, in simultaneous interpretation, due to the pressure of keeping pace with the speaker, the mental and physical exigencies and the constant code-switching, error frequency is much greater.

Most of the time, redundancy helps the simultaneous interpreter. It helps him to decode, for the fact that language is redundant allows him to miss speech segments and still have enough linguistic information to piece the idea together. For example, if he hears in Spanish "El embajador y su señ--- llegaron ayer," he doesn't need the missing ora to know that the person referred to was the ambassador's wife, because the plural verb is indicating another person, "su" is indicating possession, and "señor and señorita" are automatically rejected because of moral norms. Often the rustling of papers, a split second sound equipment failure, and so forth, can force the interpreter to fill in logically even more subtle gaps.

For example, if he hears "The Chair recognized the distinguished -----
from Venezuela," a quick mental check will bring to light such possibilities
as "delegate, representative, envoy," etc. and the interpreter will auto-
matically reject other nouns because of the qualifying "distinguished" and
the formality of the situation, indicated by "the Chair recognizes." None-
theless, redundancy does often become part of a weak interpretation when
not enough effort is spent on encoding the message, and we get sentences
such as "Today we will consider a report reviewed by the Reviewing
Committee" instead of "Today we will take up a report the Reviewing
Committee considered." This happens for 2 reasons: 1) sloppy interpre-
tation because the interpreter isn't far enough behind the speaker (at least
half a sentence) to foresee the problem in time to think of another word,
or 2) the speaker is going so fast that the interpreter simply has no time
to think of an alternative.

Another cause of error is the rapid fading of the linguistic signal.
The interpreter must catch the message the first time around, for in
simultaneous interpretation there is no chance to ask the speaker to repeat
his idea since the interpreter is in a booth at a considerable distance from
the podium; nor is there time to consult with your boothmate or a dictionary
and risk missing the following speech segments since the speaker is unaware
of any problems the interpreter might be experiencing. Sharp hearing,
good reflexes and retention, plus the ability to quickly piece together
phonemic units are basic qualities of a good simultaneous interpreter.

Here we also must mention the importance of noise (defined here as
any interference in the process of transmission of a signal but not originated
by the source). Once again we must see this in the light of the interpreter's
peculiar role as decoder and encoder. For decoding, noise is a great
hindrance, since the scraping of a chair, a cough, etc. which even momen-
tarily blocks the incoming message can result in the loss of a "no" or a
"not," thereby causing the interpreter to translate a negative message
as a positive one. A sharp noise in the room or over the wires can mean
that a listener will lose the interpretation and consequently the message.
Although "white," or background noise is less distracting than a brusque
interruption, psycholinguistic studies at Duke University have proven that
simultaneous interpreters tire more quickly and their powers of concen-
tration are greatly reduced under the strain of noise.

Feedback is another concept which is most interesting when studying
the performance of simultaneous interpreters. For years scholars claimed
that most mistakes made by simultaneous interpreters were due to the fact

that they do not monitor their speech as normal speakers do because they are simultaneously processing information from another language, and the human nervous system is not suited to this type of activity. I disagree and so do many other professional interpreters, for often an interpreter will correct what he has said: How could he know to do this if there were no feedback? How would he be aware of the mistake he made?

If we consider that language is made-up of three sub-systems (semantics, grammar and phonology), it is worthwhile to examine the importance of all three for the simultaneous interpreter.

Of the three, probably phonological aspects are the greatest thorn in the interpreter's side, since the meaning he will give to an interpretation will be determined by what he hears in the source language and what he understands from it, and only a sharp ear can sometimes distinguish between minimal pairs, barely distinguishable endings, etc. For example, let's take the case of a speaker who barely ennunciates the "h" of "heed" in "I will heed in great detail paragraph . . ." The interpreter who only hears "eed" may, due to the context, assume he said "read" and proceed to interpret the idea as such, leaving the audience somewhat consternated when no reading follows.

Here I would like to point out something that I have observed over the years. Assuming equal proficiency in both languages, it is easier to go from Spanish into English than the other way around, mainly due to phonological considerations. In general those who use Spanish as a medium of communication in international forums are native speakers, which means that no matter how different the speaker's accent is from the dialect most familiar to the interpreter, he will produce the sounds correctly, with the proper intonation patterns. On the other hand, English, which has become the most popular international language of the Third World, is often expressed by a strange assortment of pronunciations, accents, intonation patterns, etc. The interpreter, even though he has probably had no formal linguistic training, needs to know the major differences between the speaker's native language and English or else he will have to call upon all his powers of logic to second-guess the speaker at every moment. Unfortunately, the scope of English-users is so wide that the interpreter is at a considerable disadvantage. It is so helpful to know; for instance, that several Oriental languages switch l's and r's, so that "We will leap great benefits" is really "We will reap great benefits". Even native

American speakers typically slur over mid and final t 's (butter, kept, etc.), leading many interpreters to prefer the British RP accent for its clearer articulation. The following two bloopers were taken from real experiences at the UN and are concrete examples of the type of errors which can arise from phonological misinterpretations: the "Secretariat's fear of competence" should have read "sphere of competence" and "The Working Group had a number of naughty problems to consider" was really "knotty problems". In both cases, non-native English speakers were at fault probably due to the difficulty of pronouncing certain sounds in English.

Here, we will take grammar to be a set of rules that specify and express the relationships among linguistic units. It defines the units and the rules that govern their combinations into phrases, clauses and sentences. As was the case with phonological considerations, a simultaneous interpreter will prefer to decode from a native speaker because no matter how hard the subject matter is, a native speaker will invariably use clearer language and express his thoughts more concisely. Probably the interpreter's biggest headache is discrepant word order in the source and target languages. In part, this involves inevitable sentence inversion caused by the syntactical demands of the target language.* It's a difficult mental exercise and takes up precious seconds. Once again, if the interpreter is not at least half a sentence behind the speaker he can easily fall into such traps as interpreting "una importadora" as "an importing company", only to discover that the speaker goes on to call it "una importadora de máquinas-herramientas", forcing him to use the awkward expression "an importing company that deals in machine tools" since he has gone past the place for usual insertion of adjectives in English, or to begin the sentence again, showing his incompetence. Naturally the relationship between the two languages of interpretation will determine how serious the syntactic differences will be. Very little effort is required to go from Portuguese into Spanish because of their common ancestry, but many an interpreter has been forced into virtual silence when working from German into Spanish, just waiting for the verb to arrive!

Semantics deals with the meanings of language units and their combinations, or how language symbols relate to reality. Problems frequently arise for the interpreter when a speaker deviates from the standard meaning of a word. There is no way the interpreter can know what he means, except to deduce it from the context. Every day meanings become more difficult because modern technological advances have led to the coining of a lot of specialized terminology and it is simply impossible

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*Source language = the one <u>from</u> which he is interpreting
Target language = the one <u>to</u> which he is interpreting

for the interpreter to be an expert in all fields.

It also must be kept in mind that the speech signal is continuous and the simultaneous interpreter often depends on connotation, as opposed to denotation, for his information. Probably the most unnerving statement a speaker can make is to announce that he is going to tell a joke, relate a childhood experience or evoke a proverb, for these are all difficult meanings to convey in another language and often entail a play on words or involve cultural concepts which are extremely difficult to express in another language.

Such other language-related things as social registers, gestures, etc., are important to the language the interpreter chooses to use. He must be aware of sudden changes by the speaker to bring himself closer to his audience, to 'soften' his language, or to use it more forcefully when anger or irritation is shown. These aspects are very subjective and often compromise the interpreter to choose between faithfulness to the message and good taste. Address terms often require this type of intra-cultural judgement and at least from English into Spanish, it is up to the interpreter whether he translates "you" as "tú" or "usted". The interpreter must also be aware of the speaker's use of gestures, pauses, hesitation, etc., to portray the meaning he wants to give to his words. He must incorporate these features into the interpretation so that it will be in accord with the visual image the audience has of the speaker. There is nothing worse than a speaker who is obviously enthralled with his topic and an interpreter who drones on in a monotone.

It has been stated on many occasions by authorities in the field that interpreters' speech is peculiar, that it does not flow as natural speech does. Undoubtedly this is true, for the interpreter is not speaking for himself, at his own pace, but instead he must be faithful to the words of the original source. He must perform a whole series of linguistic gymnastics, listening and speaking at the same time, and of course he must never get too far behind the speaker and lose track of what he is saying. An interpreter's speech is usually hurried and he speaks at a faster rate than the speaker, often in short spurts and somewhat disjuncted, precisely because of the mental operations he must perform while he is talking. As often as not, the speaker is only reading a paper or calmly discussing some topic in which he is an authority and has perhaps even practiced what he is going to say. Unless the interpreter has been well-briefed or has a copy of the paper, he never knows what ideas are going to be thrust at him from one moment to the next.

Unless unduly pushed for time, in which case the interpreter's speech tends to be slurred and enunciated in his own particular dialect, a good simultaneous interpreter will use formal, standard language as his medium of communication and should not be able to be identified as coming from any particular country or region. He must avoid regionalisms, non-standard idioms and the like. No matter how great the temptation is to repeat proper names just as they were heard, so as not to "clash" with the phonological system of the language he is working into, a good interpreter will adapt the name to the phonetic sounds of that language. For example, the English "Smith" should be /esmit/ in Spanish so as not to interrupt the flow of the language.

Another characteristic of interpreter's speech is the frequency of pauses at abnormal points. This is due, once again, to his dependence on the speaker, who is several phrases or words ahead. Often the interpreter will put more effort into Stages 1, 2 or 3 in a difficult passage or idea, tending to "drag out" the phonation stage or fill it with time-gaining devices like "well, uh'huh, as-s-s we said .....", which brings us to another interesting aspect of the peculiarities of simultaneous interpreters.

There is no turn-taking in interpretation, as there is in normal speech, making it less social and more "parrot-like". Since there are no reactions to what he has said, the interpreter must depend solely on his own instincts as to whether he has conveyed the message properly or not. Sometimes, especially when going from Spanish to English, the interpreter must "stretch out" his utterances, for even flowery English tends to be more to the point than flowery Spanish, and the interpreter must avoid at all cost a period of silence, for even though it may be linguistically justified, the audience's impression will be that the interpreter has left something out if they hear the speaker continue and the interpreter, remain silent.

Lastly, most international agencies prefer the interpreter to translate into his native language for the same reasons that an interpreter prefers a native speaker, for it is in his native language that the interpreter's language expression is at its highest level. With the exception of true bilinguals and those people who have only retained their native language passively, it is more likely that proper word choice, syntactic structures, intonation and pronunciation cannot be equaled in the second language.

This paper has only touched upon the more apparent linguistic aspects of simultaneous interpretation. There are very specific inter-language problems such as cognates, etc., that are worthy of analysis in light of the historical development of languages. It is also particularly interesting to analyze the results of prognostic tests applied to potential simultaneous interpreters, the results of how bilinguals, interpreters-trainees and professional interpreters translate passages under real conditions, the mental division of attention for language processing or the "why" of consistent errors on certain simultaneous translation exercises or in certain passages. We need linguistic explanations for these and many other questions.