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EXPLORING THE SPEED IN SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION AND THE COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract. *There are many factors that affect (facilitate or hinder) the interpreters' listening comprehension, such as the terminology, the accent and the speed of delivery (Shareef, 2018:43). The speed, i.e., fast speech is an enemy and a friend for interpreters, especially simultaneous interpreters. Prior preparation may address deficiencies in knowledge and terminology, and to some extent, alleviate the pressure of fast delivery. But if the speed is beyond a certain limit, no interpreter can transmit the message in full, even if the interpreter is an expert in the subject (Li, 2010:19). This is even more so when the source and target languages are typologically different languages and their structures differ substantially.*

To cope with speeches faster than optimal speeds, this article will suggest several strategies based on the author's personal experience as both a conference interpreter and as a university lecturer teaching MA students enrolled at the Master's Degree Programme in Conference Interpreting.

Keywords: *simultaneous interpretation, brains on speed, speech rate, speech repository portal*

Introduction

Simultaneous interpreting is often perceived as a complex cognitive task, during which the interpreter is working at the limits of their processing capacity (Pöchhacker, 2004: 127). D. Gile (2009: 200) stated that interpreters use several strategies in order to cope with the cognitive load, among which is the *stalling*, *varying the ear-voice span* and their *speech rate*, and *anticipating*. In the process, some of the professionals choose to interpret in a consistent, personal style, regardless of the speakers, while others adopt the style of the speaker, including their speed of delivery. We are fully aware that the interpreters must speak at a sustained, steady pace, but we must also bear in mind the need to be sufficiently clear for the audience. This means the speed may be varied (Jones, 2002: 35).

Although it is important to stress that "some speakers may speak very rapidly but provide little information" (Gile 1995: 173), the speed of delivery still plays a very important role in SI, especially at the novices' level. Consequently, a number of professional conference interpreters and a great part of the trainees, state that speed is one of most obvious challenges that they have to deal with and it was identified as the main stressor by professional interpreters. This challenge is intensified by the fact that some speeches are written to be read out, implying high density and low redundancy.

There are researchers (Peelle et. al., 2004) who have conducted fMRI imaging on listeners' "brains on speed" and found that higher rates of speed in speech forced listeners' brains to compensate by recruiting more areas to process speech, hence the stress for interpreters, who are also sort of

"brains on speed", though, they listen to the speakers differently than the participants. Moreover, in case of fast delivery, the interpreter's rate of speaking amounts to between 71-74% of the speaker's rate, whereas in normal speed deliveries, the rate is close to or beyond 90%. When a speech is delivered too fast, „the ears" cannot catch up with „the mouth" and the listener has difficulty understanding the speaker (Li, 2010:19). When a speaker's delivery is rapid, listening and analysis alone will consume almost all the interpreter's energy. Little energy will be left for production, especially when production involves complicated language restructuring. The research conducted so far has shown that three factors affect the speech rate: the age, sex, and native status – the speed is higher among men and in particular, native speakers, however, it declines with age.

Overview of Speed in the Context of Simultaneous Interpretation

There is a plethora of SI parameters that are typically subject of research in translation, including speech delivery rates (the speed at which the persons speak). Speech rate has been investigated as the possible source of difficulty in interpretation. Gerver (1969) was the first to investigate high speed delivery of the ST.

In the past, different approaches were used for measuring the speech rate, beginning with the counting of words per time unit. Already in 1966, Caroll concluded that words vary in length and counting the speech rate based on words per minute should be discounted because it can lead to misleading results (Vancura, 2013:89). Therefore, many proposed the syllable as the unit in measuring the speech, considering that it is a much more reliable measure for the speech rate than the number of words, but that one should bear in mind that different languages have very different syllable structures and that we should compare languages speaking rate by measuring the number of sounds produced per second, rather than the number of syllables.

Speech rates vary from one type of discourse to another. When interpreters render prepared SL discourses spontaneously, their speech tends to be longer and more redundant than in spontaneous SL discourse. The following are the reference values proposed for SI interpreters: speeds of 100-120 wpm – easy pace; 120-140 wpm – moderate pace; 140-160 wpm – challenging pace; over 160 wpm – difficult pace. In the '60s, a speech rate between 100-120 wpm was allegedly considered to be comfortable (the rate of SI during the Nuremberg trials was 60 wpm), and the magical figure of around 100-120 wpm is quoted by scholars as being reasonably comfortable nowadays too.

Delivering fast speeches, in particular during international conferences, will certainly lead to a series of issues: difficulty in comprehension, mistranslation, loss of information, and reduced accuracy, because there is a maximum output that an interpreter can produce within a given time interval; the greater the input, the greater the chance of error and omission (Li, 2010:19). Moreover, with fast speeches, the public can struggle to understand the message even in the native language. And, as pointed out by Seleskovitch (1978), not being able to work at one's own speed is the most difficult constraint imposed on simultaneous interpreters. Interpreters in this situation are left with only two choices: process the SL quickly or fail and omit portions in their interpretation. For Lederer (1981), improvised discourse at 150-170 wpm should be considered a threshold beyond which simultaneous interpreting cannot be performed, while Setton and Dawrant (2016) state that at 160 wpm, professional conference interpreters are able to provide a mostly complete, but compressed version, while at speeds over 160 wpm, even skilled professionals will drop content and resort to strategies to keep up.

How to speed up the reaction time?

In simultaneous interpretation, the last thing the interpreter should do is enter into a race with the speaker. The interpreter will get caught in a vicious circle: racing behind the speaker, they will have less time to analyse meaning and less time to decide how to express it. On the contrary, with a fast speaker, the interpreter should take some distance, analyze fully, and see how they can use every technique – the salami technique, simplifying, generalizing, general economy of expression, and where

necessary omission – to convey as much as possible of the speaker' s meaning in as few syllables as possible (Jones, 2002:102).

To react quicker when the information delivered is dense and complex, one has to process and analyse the information faster and convey it faster in the target language. During various events, but also during the training of future interpreters, some of the following techniques are applied:

a) Avoiding the repetition of information
b) Choosing concise options in the target language
c) Delivering faster
d) Better management of the decalage
e) Summary
f) Omission

All interpreters have limited mental capacity. In simultaneous interpretation (SI), interpreters have to allocate attention among several tasks: listening and analysis, production, short term memory and coordination. Therefore, interpreters apply coping strategies to deal with speeches that are delivered faster than the optimal speed. These are the strategies that may be used in both novice and experienced interpreters: the interpreter may request the speaker to slow down by waving; communicating via the public, via the chairperson, or directly to the speaker. This can be efficient, at least for some time, until the speaker returns to their speaking habits. The interpreter can speed up by racing behind the speaker, though this could impact the cognitive load and subsequently, the voice. Another solution is to summarise by wrapping up the ideas, close synthesis or leaving out unimportant parts. And finally, termination of service by sending a polite message to the public and turning off the microphone and light, however, this is a last instance solution.

Prior preparation may address deficiencies in knowledge and terminology, and to some extent, alleviate the pressure of fast delivery. But if the speed is beyond a certain limit, no interpreter can transmit the message in full, even if the interpreter is an expert in the subject matter. This is even more so when the structures of the source and target languages differ substantially.

During SI classes, learners/future interpreters should be gradually exposed to varying factors of increasing complexity, speed being a factor that intensifies all other difficulties. Listening and experiments with slow/fast scripts/recordings are just two exercises applied by lecturers in this sense. Thus, it is absolutely important to regard the high speed of speaking in both native language and foreign languages as one of the skills that both the teaching staff and the trainees shall be focused on during the classes and this shall also be an integral part of the curriculum for training interpreters. For interpreters, rehearsals, access to manuscripts, provision of adequate working conditions can be a solution. Additionally, briefing speakers before and after the event helps as well. They need to be aware of need to control speed, especially when reading from written texts.

Further research

A future study will be conducted to analyse the speech rate of the source text speaker and its influence on the conveyance of the target text by master's programme graduate students who will perform simultaneous interpretation of original speeches from English into Romanian and Russian (their mother tongues) during the second semester, in 2022, after 8 months of training. The participants will be tested based on speeches from the Speech Repository Portal (https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sr/home).

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