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The Choice of Language for Note-taking for the Purposes of Consecutive Interpreting

An English-Polish Case Study

1. Introduction

The article covers the results of a small-scale empirical case study of note-taking for the purposes of consecutive interpretation. The research focused on the choice of language for the preparation of notes; the study itself was a side project of a practical course in conference interpreting; it was based on what was supposed to be a *test* task in note-taking for students of a translation and interpreting programme.

2. Background

Through decades of interpreting research, the subject of note-taking for the purposes of carrying out a consecutive interpretation of a speech has been tackled a number of times by significant interpreting researchers, including, for instance, the analyses by Seleskovich [1975], Alexieva

[1993], Gile [1994], Jones [1998] or Janikowski [2015]. Apart from academic research, several practical manuals on preparing notes for consecutive interpreting have been published by experienced professional conference interpreters and conference interpreting trainers, such as classic note-taking manuals by Herbert [1952], and Rozan [1956] or a more contemporary influential work by Gillies [2007]. Both of those types of literature describing note-taking provide multi-layered analyses of processes that take place during the short as it is albeit intensive period when the interpreter processes what they hear and transforms it into notes. They also presented useful tips on how to optimise taking down different ideas and notions and provided suggestions on types of abbreviations or symbols to be used.

The particular issue of the choice of language for the purposes of note-taking and the degree of symbol use has also been analysed, though not as extensively; one can mention, e.g., Rozan [1956] again, who presents a practical point of view and suggests using mostly *natural* language with limited use of symbols. Different approaches towards language choice were presented by the researchers, focusing on whether to use the source language (ST) or the target language (TL) of the particular language combination, as briefly summarised by Dam [2004: 252]:

The basic point of disagreement being whether the notes should be taken down in the source language or in the target language. For example, Seleskovitch & Lederer [1989] firmly recommend using the target language, whereas others feel that the source language is a better choice [e.g. Ilg 1988; Alexieva 1993].

Both these approaches have valid grounds for recommendation: the advocates of noting in the SL may claim that this is less of a cognitive burden for the interpreter to simply write down the pieces of information as they are being heard, but, at the same time, it requires more effort while performing the interpretation itself, as this means transferring the SL notes into the TL oral output. Adopting the other approach works more or less the other way round: the interpreter needs more effort and concentration to translate the SL input into the TL on the spot. However, thanks to this being done at an earlier stage of the process, they may be more comfortable providing the interpretation of the speech and they may have an opportunity to focus more on other aspects, e.g., tone of voice, eye contact, gestures or visual presentation. Both approaches have positive and negative aspects, but, as Gillies points out, “in practice, your notes will be a mix of

both languages” [2004: 120],¹ and this remark may be seen as the cornerstone of this study, which attempts to ascertain the balance balance would be between the SL, the TL, symbols, and possibly a third language.

Only several empirical case studies on the choice of language for the purposes of note-taking have been made, e.g., Dam [2004], Szabó [2006] or Zhan [2019], with Danish-Spanish, English-Hungarian, and English-Chinese language combinations, respectively. All of them featured an analysis of the actual output provided by conference interpreting students and all, with Dam’s experiment in particular, were a basis and a source of inspiration for carrying out a similar study in the English-Polish combination. A previous paper by Błaszczuk & Hanusiak [2010] focused on the choice of language for notes for consecutive interpreting in this language combination (also featuring possible use of a third language, Finnish or Swedish in this case), but it was purely theoretical, without any empirical evidence gathered.

3. Study Material

The material collected for this research featured scans of notes taken by students of the MA Programme of the Chair for Translation Studies and Intercultural Communication. The corpus for the study comprises actual notes taken by three different cohorts of students; the notes were prepared on the same speech given as a consecutive interpreting task. They were later scanned and all instances of writing were divided into segments in order to analyse what was the preferred language for students to take their notes in for this particular task.

3.1 Study Group

The group consisted of three different cohorts of students of the MA Programme *Translation and Intercultural Communication* of the Chair for Translation Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, who were in the second (final) year of their MA programme. The total number of students whose notes were analysed amounted to 52. All of them participated in the obligatory 30-hour (1.5 hour per week) regular course that focused almost entirely on practical training of consecutive and simultaneous interpretation, with the emphasis on the former. All of the students

¹ „W praktyce twoje notatki będą na pewno stanowić połączenie obu języków” – Gillies [2004: 120, translation by D. Hanusiak].

were Polish (which naturally made Polish their A language) and, as it is one of the requirements of the programme, all of them had English as their B language, i.e., it was the language to which and from which they interpreted speeches from/to Polish; all students also worked with a C language (passive language) within the programme (either French, German, Italian, Spanish or Russian).

The test was performed when the students were nearing the end of the semester, being at a relatively *advanced* level of doing consecutive in the context of the course; they had less than a month to their final examination in consecutive interpreting. Obviously, in most cases, it would be hard to call the participants *professional interpreters*, but, on the other hand, they were not completely naïve in consecutive interpretation as a kind of professional task, with several weeks of intensive training in both note-taking (theoretical introduction and regular practice in class every week) and performing consecutive interpreting tasks of real life speeches from English into Polish and vice versa, with the aim of simulating a professional context.

3.2 Source Speech and the Note-taking Task

Each of the students took notes to a video recording of a real-life speech from the European Parliament, made by the former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, founder of the Reform UK party (previously known as Brexit Party) and a long-time Member of the European Parliament, Nigel Farage, who gave a statement on the 10th anniversary of the introduction of the Eurozone. Farage, widely regarded a flamboyant and very controversial figure both home and abroad, renowned for his contentious public statements, and one of the architects of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, delivered a speech harshly critical of the financial policies of the Eurozone and Euro as a currency itself. Although the recorded fragment of the speech was merely 2 minutes and 59 seconds long, it might easily be assessed as very demanding for interpreters, especially beginners. The text was coherent, but very emotional and featured statistics, proper names, names of institutions, metaphors, economic terms, cultural references to communist times (e.g., five-year plans), and even foreign language/culture concepts (*Volkerkerker*). The speech was not read out, but delivered at a high pace, with only very scanty pauses.

The idea of choosing this speech for the exercise was to see how the students will make notes when facing a fast, dense, and difficult text; namely, what language they would choose in a situation where they were put under much stress and had little time to make the decision. To ensure that each participant would do their best while preparing the notes, it was not known to the student groups who will actually make the interpretation of the speech in front of the class (it was the regular practice during the course).

4. Output Analysis

After collecting the notes from the 52 students, the sheets of paper were scanned and subdivided into segments that were to represent meaningful units of the speaker's utterance (words, collocations or symbols). For the purposes of this analysis, these segments were split into five categories:

- source language (SL): text that was noted down in English;
- target language (TL): text that was noted down in Polish;
- other/third language: text that was noted down in any other language than either English or Polish;
- symbols: any graphic symbols that were used to denote a given notion: drawings (e.g., improvised drawing of Earth or a lightning), arrows, geometrical shapes, universal symbols (e.g., €, ♀ ♂, ☺ ☹), etc.;
- illegible text: any piece of handwriting that could not be deciphered and classified into the remaining groups.

4.1 Results

All the text from the notes of 52 participants was analysed with the use of the classification criteria described above. The aim of the analysis was to classify a given participant into one of five different categories on the basis of the dominant language they made the notes in. The categories split the participants into those:

- using only SL;
- using mainly SL;
- using both the SL and the TL in similar proportion;
- using mainly TL;
- using only TL.

For the purposes of this analysis, it was assumed that *mainly* would refer to cases where at least 66.6% of the notes were taken either in the source or target language; any smaller difference in favour of either was classified as *a mix of both languages*. The results were as follows:

Table 1. The choice of language

Language used	Number of participants	Percentage
Only SL	17	32.7%
Majority SL	14	26.9%
Mix of both	13	25%
Majority TL	7	13.4%
Only TL	1	1.9%

What is clearly visible (and may even be somehow surprising) is a very strong tendency towards the SL, as 59.6% of the subjects chose to take notes either largely or completely in the source language while only one student focused entirely on taking notes in the TL. On the other hand, almost two thirds (65.3%) of the entire study group were using both languages, regardless of the proportions between the SL and the TL, which was something that could have been expected, as it was pointed out by Gillies (quoted in section 2). Still, it is worth noticing that the most numerous group of all five chose to use only the SL. One also needs to point out that in all of the studied notes, there was no single instance of using a third language to describe a particular meaningful unit: all that was legible was either in English or Polish, or was a graphic symbol.

A separate table concerns the frequency of the use of graphic symbols:

Table 2. The use of symbols

Number of symbols used	Number of participants	Percentage
>10	4	7.7%
5-10	12	23.1%
1-4	28	53.8%
no symbols	8	15.4%

It demonstrates that the majority of the group used a very limited number of symbols. However, it has to be noted that only a small proportion of the study group decided to abandon the use of symbols entirely, as a very significant majority of 84.6% decided to use at least one symbol.

5. Conclusions and Possible Further Research

When it comes to the choice of language, the majority of the participants created their notes in both languages, however, it is clear that the studied group expressed a strong tendency towards using the source language. The possible explanations may be:

- The level of the proficiency: although the students were at an advanced stage of their course, they still did not have much experience. The structural limitations of the course provided only one 1.5 hour class each week which gave the students regular practice in taking notes (they never knew in advance who would be interpreting a given speech, so all of them had to take notes each time a speech was presented). One may suspect that at this stage it may still be easier for a student to try to write down what they heard more or less literally, in the language of the speech, rather than transforming the pieces of information into the target language.
- The difficulty of the speech: even though the speech was rather short (2' 59") in comparison with other materials the students had already interpreted, it may be perceived as quite demanding, as pointed out at the beginning of this article. Unlike any teaching materials, aimed purely at training interpreting skills, with the clearly perceptible structure of the speech and argumentation lines, the speech that served as the basis for this study was a real-life, emotional rant, delivered quite fast and without pauses. All this, possibly with a combination of the arguments above concerning the proficiency of the groups, may have influenced the students to take notes fast, in a „natural” way of writing down anything they hear to manage to grasp the entire meaning.
- The language of the speech: since the speech was delivered in English, it may have had a significant impact on the degree to which the SL was used in the notes in the study group. Since throughout the course, the students were generally encouraged to note down as little and use as short words as possible, English may have been a natural choice, especially in comparison with the TL (Polish), which generally has

longer words. This may also explain the absence of any third language segments; if the language combination used had not involved English, one might assume that some English expressions could appear there, obviously being counted into the “other/third language” category.

Fairly similar explanations may apply to the use of symbols: it may have been influenced by the proficiency level of the group (the majority of the group used some symbols, but fewer than 5 in the whole extent of their notes), but apparently, this use is not tied to language combination; symbols are supposed to denote a given term or idea regardless of the language the speech is being performed in. What might also have had some influence here is the length of the speech, as obviously the longer it would have been, the bigger the potential for the use of any symbol.

An interesting idea for further research of this kind would be a similar analysis in other language combinations: either the reverse combination with a Polish source speech intended to be interpreted into English, which might suggest a stronger tendency to lean towards noting in the TL, or a language combination without English, which might result in English expressions appearing in the “other/third language” category. It would also be tempting to conduct the same experiment with professional, experienced interpreters active on the market to see if there would be a difference in the preference of the note-taking language and frequency of the use of symbols. Another possible option would be to try to check if the choice of language for note-taking actually had any impact on the delivery of the interpretation, e.g., whether the students made any interruptions or omissions while trying to translate the SL segments in their notes on the spot or whether there were any omissions that might stem from the fact that the notes made in the TL were incomplete as the participant was not able to render everything correctly into the TL while taking the notes. There could be some potential problems with practical aspects of this “check against delivery” approach – to make any kinds of comparison, several interpretations of the text would be necessary, while usually, in class conditions, only one person delivers the interpretation of a given speech, so potentially the analysed group would be significantly smaller than the group analysed in this study.

All the listed possibilities, related to different language combinations, different speech length/difficulty and levels of competence of participants showcase the potential for further empirical research regarding the choice

of language for the purposes of taking notes for a consecutive interpreting task.

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ABSTRACT

The subject of the article is the choice of language that is used for note-taking for consecutive interpreting. The paper is based on a small-scale empirical case study analysis of note-taking by interpreting students. The analysis was aimed at determining which language – source language (SL) or target language (TL) – was preferred by students, who were given freedom of choice regarding the selection of language that they would use for the preparation of notes to help with consecutive interpreting tasks. The study group consisted of three cohorts of translation and interpreting students who were at the end of their first semester of work with consecutive. The students were asked to prepare notes for a regular consecutive task, from English into Polish; Polish was the mother tongue for all of the students. The outcomes of the analysis may show what might be the “natural” choice of language for notation and may provide suggestions about improving the system of teaching notation in the case of novice interpreters.

Keywords: interpreting, consecutive interpreting, note-taking, choice of language, interpreter training

ABSTRAKT**Wybór języka na potrzeby notatek do tłumaczenia konsekutywnego: studium przypadku tłumaczenia z języka angielskiego na polski**

Przedmiotem artykułu jest wybór języka przy sporządzaniu notatek na potrzeby tłumaczenia konsekutywnego. Tekst zawiera studium przypadku faktycznie sporządzonych notatek przez studentów kierunku tłumaczeniowego. Celem analizy jest określenie, który język – język źródłowy czy język docelowy – był preferowany przez uczestników, którzy mieli dowolność wyboru języka na potrzeby notatek do tłumaczenia konsekutywnego. Badana grupa składała się z trzech kohort studentów kierunku przekład i komunikacja międzykulturowa; uczestnicy byli na etapie końca pierwszego semestru zajęć z tłumaczenia konsekutywnego. Uczestnicy przygotowali notatki konkretnego przemówienia w języku angielskim z celem potencjalnego przełożenia tego przemówienia na język polski (będący językiem ojczystym wszystkich uczestników). Wyniki analizy mogą wskazać, który język będzie „naturalnym” wyborem uczestnika, i zasugerować potencjalne usprawnienie nauczania systemu notowania u początkujących tłumaczy.

Słowa kluczowe: tłumaczenie ustne, tłumaczenie konsekutywne, *note-taking*, wybór języka, kształcenie tłumaczy