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Progress in Simultaneous Interpreting - an Evaluation of the Development of four Students

Abstract

This article describes an analysis of students' simultaneous interpreting performance. The interpreting performance of four students was recorded in the beginning and at the end of their interpreting training. The performances were then analysed by using a modified version of a model of analysis presented by Kopczynski (1980 and 1981). Factors paid attention to in the analysis were equivalence, linguistic competence, linguistic performance and style. The analysis shows that equivalence improves during the period of training but does not achieve the level of equivalence of professional interpreters. In the area of linguistic competence, progress can be noticed as well, but in the area of linguistic performance the students only progress slightly.

1. Background

For more than one decade simultaneous interpreting in Finland has been a subject that can be included in a university degree in languages. At the University of Vaasa students can pursue 20 credits in interpreting between Finnish and Scandinavian languages. The students of interpreting may have either of the domestic languages, Finnish or Swedish, as their mother tongue, but are all trained together as one group of students. They are all trained in interpreting from Finnish into Swedish and from the Scandinavian languages into Finnish.

Working with students of interpreting is a challenging task and teachers as well as students often ask themselves if and how the interpreting ability of the students improves during their training and how the interpreting ability can be assessed. Another question arising is how the performance of students who have just passed their examinations differ from the performance of professional interpreters. These

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questions have formed the basis for some studies in interpreting carried out at the University of Vaasa (Harmaakivi 1993, Törmä 1992, Vik-Tuovinen 1990 and 1993a).

The study described in this article aims at evaluating the improvement of students' simultaneous interpreting performance and testing one model of evaluation. In order to show the differences between student and professional interpreters the results of this study are supplemented by some of the results Harmaakivi (1993) obtained when comparing students of interpreting with professional interpreters.

2. Corpus

This study is based on experiments made with the same four students in 1988 in the beginning of their interpreting training and in 1992 after finishing their interpreting courses. The experiments consisted of short (6 and 5 minutes) fictional opening speeches interpreted simultaneously from Finnish into Swedish.

The source texts were based on a written text and read aloud by persons familiar with the texts. Thus, the texts represent one of the most common type of source texts for conference interpreters (about different types of texts as source texts for interpreting cf. Kopczynski 1980, 6 and Vik-Tuovinen 1993b, 47). The recordings of the source texts as well as the interpretations performed by the students were transcribed in order to facilitate the comparison. In this study the macrosyntagm as defined by Loman and Jörgensen (1971, 9) is used as the unit of comparison.

The students in this study are called A, B, C and D. Three of the students (A, C and D) have a bilingual background with an educational background in both Finnish and Swedish or with one of their parents having Swedish and the other having Finnish as his/her mother tongue. However, only one student (C) considered him/herself to be totally bilingual. The mother tongue of the other students are, according to their own statements, A - Finnish, B - Finnish, D-Swedish. By 1992 all of the students had been employed as interpreters on some occasions. Students A and D are, according to a questionnaire filled in by the students in connection with the second experiment, the most experienced ones and the ones that seem most motivated for continuing to improve their interpreting skills.

3.   Theoretical Basis and Methodology

The theoretical basis of my study on progress in students' simultaneous interpreting performances and Harmaakivi's study (1993) that includes professional interpreters as well, is the model of analysis presented by Kopczynski (1980 and 1981). To some extent I have modified and simplified Kopczynski's model of analysis. My model of analysis consists of an analysis of equivalence, linguistic competence, linguistic performance and style.

Kopczynski defines equivalence as "equivalent are pairs of messages in L1 and L2 when they have the same semantic representation" (1981, 399). I define equivalence as correspondence of meaning. I prefer to use the term communicative equivalence in order to stress the fact that equivalence should be analysed according to the context and situation in which the interpreting takes place.

The analysis of linguistic competence, linguistic performance and style is based on a classification of the macrosyntagms into different categories according to deficiencies or errors possibly appearing in the performances of the students. In order to get an overall analysis the deficiencies and errors are also registered in not communicatively equivalent macrosyntagms. The classification consists of the following categories (cf. Kopczynski 1981, 402-403 and Vik-Tuovinen 1993a, 58):

Communicative equivalence

1. Communicative equivalence. The units are communicatively equivalent without any errors or deficiencies.
2. Communicative equivalence with error/s of competence. The unit includes some error/s of linguistic competence, such as a wrong word or wrong inflections.
3. Communicative equivalence with error/s of performance. The unit includes some error/s of linguistic performance, such as stuttering or correction of false starts.
4. Communicative equivalence with error/s of style.
5. Communicative equivalence with a combination of some of the errors mentioned in the categories 2 - 4.

No communicative equivalence

6. No communicative equivalence without errors of competence, performance or style.
7. No communicative equivalence with error/s of competence.
8. No communicative equivalence with error/s of performance.
9. No communicative equivalence with error/s of style.
10. No communicative equivalence with some combination of the errors mentioned in the categories 7 - 9.
11. No communicative equivalence with essential information of the original unit missing in the interpreting unit.

My hypothesis is that the interpreting ability of the students for several reasons improves during the period of training. The students study either Finnish or Swedish as their main subject at the university and they have the other language as their mother tongue. At the university the students pursue courses in their mother tongue as well. Their linguistic competence and their sense of style regarding both languages involved in the experiments are therefore likely to improve between the experiments in 1988 and 1992. The equivalence can be expected to improve thanks to the improvement of the linguistic competence in both languages and to the interpreting training. The linguistic performance is likely to improve but it may, however, be individual and some students may have a tendency to always, for example, make more sounds of hesitation and stutter more than others.

4. Results of Analysis

In the following I will discuss the results of the analysis concentrating on communicative equivalence, linguistic competence and linguistic performance. In the corpus of my study there appeared so few errors of style that I consider it to be impossible to draw any conclusions regarding style. As the aim of my study was to test the model of analysis as well, I still wanted to preserve this category in the model as it might be of importance in some future analysis.

A table presenting the overall results of the analysis is included as an appendix to this article.

4.1. Communicative Equivalence

Table 1 presents the results of the experiments in 1988 and 1992 regarding equivalence. The figures show the percentage of commuicatively equivalent macrosyntagms in the performances of the students.

Table 1. Percentage of communicatively equivalent macrosyntagms in 1988 and 1992 by student and an average for all the students.

Comm. equiv.	A	B	C	D	Average
1988	65	74	62	65	66
1992	80	73	66	95	78
Difference	+15	-1	+4	+30	

Table 1 shows a clear difference between the students. Students A and D improve their equivalence, while students B and C stay at about the same level in 1992 as in 1988. It would be tempting to draw the conclusion that some students are affected by training and some are not, but because of the few students involved, the fact that the experiments were short and just one experiment was done per year, one should be cautious as regards definite conclusions. One interesting fact, however, is that the progress in equivalence that can be noticed for students A and D correlates with the amount of interpreting practice of the students and their motivation for improving the interpreting skills mentioned in chapter 2.

Harmaakivi (1993) used the same method as was used in my study to analyse an experiment with three language students, three interpreting students and three professional interpreters. As source text she used a fictional lesson and the interpreters were given some written background material beforehand. The experiment showed a clear difference between professionals and students regarding equivalence. Table 2 shows the average percentage of the macrosyntagms equivalently reproduced in the interpretation by each group of interpreters.

Table 2. Average percentage of communicatively equivalent macro-syntagms by language students, interpreting students and professional interpreters (Harmaakivi 1993, 44).

	Communicative equivalence
Language students	64%
Interpreting students	76%
Professional interpreters	93%

The interpreting performances by the language students and the interpreting students correlate surprisingly well with the results of my experiment with students in the beginning of and at the end of their interpreting training (cf. table 1). The highest individual equivalence reported in Harmaakivi's study was 96% by one of the professionals. The results of the other two professional interpreters were 90% and 93% (Harmaakivi 1993, 41). If these results are compared with those of my experiment in 1992, the conclusion is that only one of the students in my study seems to be at the same level as professionals regarding equivalence.

4.2. Linguistic Competence

Errors of linguistic competence can be caused by insufficient knowledge of either the source language or the target language. If the interpreter has serious problems in understanding the source text or producing the target text the result is non-equivalence. But if the problems are minor, and usually then concerning the target language, the result will be an equivalent, but not very "beautiful" interpreting output.

The most common errors of linguistic competence in the performances of the students were errors caused by the fact that the student used the wrong word in his/her performance. The Finnish word *palvelu* (= service), for example, was translated by the Swedish word *förtjäning* when the right word in this context would have been *service* or *tjänster.* In Swedish there exists no such word as *förtjäning,* but the word is formed by using the same stem as in *tjänster.* Other common errors of linguistic competence were, for example, wrong gender of words and wrong word order. Most of the errors of competence by students A and

B were of the kind often made by people with Finnish as their mother tongue when expressing themselves in Swedish and the errors could be classified into five groups. Table 3 shows the number of errors of linguistic competence and the classification of the errors.

Table 3. Number of errors of linguistic competence performed by the students in 1988 and 1992.

	A		B		C		D	
	-88	-92	-88	-92	-88	-92	-88	-92
Wrong word	22	10	17	11	9	2	6	4
Word order	2	4	0	0	1	0	0	1
Inflection	9	2	9	6	2	0	1	2
Gender	2	3	2	6	0	0	0	0
Other	4	1	3	0	0	0	0	1
Sum	39	20	31	23	12	2	7	8

A downward tendency can be noticed for most of the students in the number of errors of linguistic competence. That is what could be expected, as students A and B have the target language of the experiments, Swedish, as their main subject in their studies at the university. The fact that students C and D also have errors of linguistic competence is interesting. Most of the errors of linguistic competence produced by C and D might, however, not be real errors of linguistic competence, but errors of linguistic performance caused by insufficient processing capacity when interpreting (cf. for example Gile 1992, 191). This problem arising as a consequence of my ambition to be objective in the analysis is discussed in Vik-Tuovinen (1993a, 63-64).

4.3. Linguistic Performance

Errors of linguistic performance are, for example, stuttering, correction of false starts and sounds produced while hesitating. In my classification interpreting units with errors of linguistic performance can occur in several of the categories mentioned in the model of analysis as they also constitute one type of error in the categories consisting of combinations of several types of errors.

Table 4. Percentage of macrosyntagms with errors of linguistic performance by student in 1988 and 1992.

Errors of ling. perf.	A	B	C	D
1988	30	53	55	68
1992	29	47	41	46

The number of errors of linguistic performance is lower in 1992 than in 1988 for all the students. But there is no significant improvement. Student A, for example, who committed fewest errors of linguistic performance in both tests, had this type of error in 30% of his/her macrosyntagms in 1988 and in 29% in 1992. Student D had the highest percentage of all the students in 1988, namely errors of performance in 68% of the macrosyntagms. In 1992 his/her result was errors of performance in 46% of the units. Errors of performance are usually considered to be typical of spoken language. Student performance, however, cannot be considered satisfactory as long as even the best student has this kind of error in about 30% of the macrosyntagms.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the performances of the students shows that their interpreting skills do improve during their interpreting training. This is especially true as regards equivalence and linguistic competence. At the end of their training the level of equivalence achieved by most of the students is not, however, at the level of professional interpreters, and their linguistic competence needs to be further improved, too. The importance of a fluent performance without stuttering, repetitions and hesitation etc. has been stressed in the training of the students, but their output is still not satisfactory.

The model of analysis presented in this study is well-suited for analyses of interpreting performances as it is detailed and pays attention to several aspects of interpretation. It is, however, time consuming and therefore applicable only to a small corpus.

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Appendix

Classification of the macrosyntagms according to the model of analysis presented in chapter 3. The figures express the percentage of units per category by the students A, B, C and D.

Category	A -88	A -92	B -88	B -92	C -88	C -92	D -88	D -92
1	17	36	18	17	18	31	10	44
2	21	24	7	17	3	0	0	7
3	10	18	27	24	32	35	46	37
4	3	0	0	0	2	0	2	0
5	14	2	22	15	7	0	7	7
6	2	2	3	4	3	2	3	0
7	3	2	0	0	0	2	2	0
8	0	5	2	4	13	4	12	2
9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	6	4	2	4	3	2	3	0
11	24	8	20	15	18	24	17	2