

A STUDY OF ERRORS IN CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETATION*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the recent upsurge in research in second language acquisition, bilingualism and how the transition is made from one language

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into another or the "bilingual switch mechanism" (Coughlin, 1985) has been the focus of much interest. Conference interpretation, both consecutive and simultaneous interpretation, is the conscious transition from one language into another. Conference interpretation includes consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation. Consecutive interpretation occurs when the interpreter listens to a complete idea while taking notes and then interprets the speech (or part of it) into the target language. In simultaneous interpretation, the interpreter is in a booth and listens and interprets through the use of a microphone and headphones at the same time as the speaker is speaking. The lag time between the speaker's original speech and the interpreter's interpretation is usually a few seconds. As soon as the interpreter has captured an idea, it is transmitted to the audience who listen through headset receivers.

Conference interpretation is a new field in which empirical studies are not widespread. Simultaneous interpretation was used for the first time during the International Labour Conference at Geneva in 1927 (Coughlin, 1985). It gained wide acceptance after its successful use at the Nuremberg Trials in the mid-1940s (Schweda-Nicholson, 1987). Most instructors of conference interpretation are also professional interpreters and balance two careers at a time. The tendency in conference interpretation is to pass on a technical know-how or skill rather than to participate in the conduct of research.

Students at the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation (GSIT) located in Seoul, Korea, begin to learn consecutive interpretation from the first year of studies. The program consists of two years of courses including consecutive and simultaneous interpretation as well as written

translation. All students pass through the courses collectively as a group, and there are no electives from which students can select. The curriculum is not tailored to fit the specific needs of each individual student.

The first phase of consecutive interpretation begins with having the students summarize a text in Korean (the mother tongue) into Korean. This is not a matter of simply remembering words but of extracting the main idea in a succinct and concise manner. Once the students have mastered summarizing, the same is done with an English text.

The next phase consists of summarizing an English text into Korean. The final phase in consecutive interpretation is to work from Korean into English and vice versa. Though interpreters who work with languages which are considered "official" international conferences rarely work into their "B" (foreign language) language, those who have "exotic" languages (i.e. not recognized as an official language at international conferences) must be able to work in both directions, namely into their mother tongue and foreign language.

The process of analyzing consecutive interpretation consists of teachers commenting on mistakes that the student has made and evaluating the general performance. The errors can range from those related to meaning, grammar, pronunciation, and accent to lexical and semantic meanings. Since no two texts are identical, even if the subject is the same and since there is never an ideally correct translation, students will demonstrate a wide variety of errors and error patterns.

The purpose of the study is to examine the consecutive interpretation efforts of beginning second-year students in interpretation by analyzing the types of errors students make. By analyzing the patterns of errors made by

students, instructors will be able to use the error patterns as a diagnostic tool for the design of instruction.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

There are few empirical studies which have been conducted regarding interpretation. Most of the papers written are opinion papers offered by practitioners which include views on how to teach interpretation (Viaggio, 1991).

Barik (1973) examined simultaneous interpretation and categorized the results into temporal and quantitative data. He focused on the effect of time lag, articulation and speed of interpretation. In another study by Barik (1975), the same subject was treated but this time using qualitative and linguistic data. Barik categorized translation departures into omissions, additions and substitutions or errors of translation. Barik's papers are informative as to how texts of interpretation can be categorized and how data can be manipulated and categorized. However, the fine line between what is considered a mild error and what is considered a gross error can sometimes be difficult to distinguish. Language does not lend itself to such clear-cut categorization.

Parks (1982) defines mistakes as "something which violates the norms of standard usage, however these may be defined. The concept of "mistake" is relative to the norms of a particular speech community." He gives some guidelines as to the seriousness of various types of mistakes. Phonological, intonational and structural errors are not so serious and can be

ignored as long as they do not interfere with the listener's understanding of the text. If the correct intonation is not used when asking a question, the listener can become confused and therefore it would be considered a mistake. Short omissions are of little importance because most texts are sufficiently repetitive to render them innocuous. A specific item on a list may be left out without having dire consequences, unless the speaker comes back to refer to the item at some later time in his speech. Semantic errors can be considered quite serious. For example, the insertion of a negative in a sentence will distort the meaning of the message. Paraphrasing and approximation may be accepted as long as they convey the essence of the text. Though not recommended, it can be a handy tool to use, especially when the speaker is speaking too quickly. Lexical errors are considered to be extremely serious because the wrong choice of vocabulary can change the meaning crucially. Knowing the right word can greatly determine to what extent the listener will trust the interpreter. Speaking the same language with the same jargon is the key to being accepted.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design will be a form of content analysis, but will not be limited to the parameters indicated in the social science literature (Rosengren, 1981; Weber, 1985; Krathwohl, 1985) Weber (1985) defines eight steps for content analysis: (1) define the recording units; (2) define the categories; (3) test coding on sample of text; (4) assess accuracy or reliability; (5) assess achieved reliability of accuracy; (6) return to step (3);

(7) code all text; (8) assess achieved reliability and accuracy.

In the case of social science, the recording units are defined as words, sentences, themes, paragraphs or the whole text. In the case of consecutive interpretation, it would not be a matter of counting the number of words or sentences, but rather the categorization of the type of errors made and a noting of their frequency. The categories do not have to be mutually exclusive because sometimes one error can compound and lead to another error. For example, an error in pronunciation may lead to a mistake in meaning.

This study asked three questions: (1) What types of errors do second-year students of interpretation make when interpreting consecutively from Korean into English? (2) Are there error patterns that can be categorized? (3) Does the background of the students and number of years spent abroad affect the frequency and kind of errors most likely to be made?

The targeted population in this study are the second year students of the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation (GSIT). Therefore, the sample will consist of eight graduate students (four male, four female) selected from a total of thirty-four studying interpretation and translation at the GSIT. All students have at least a bachelor's degree but their field of study is varied because there are no prerequisite studies needed in order to apply to the GSIT. They have all completed one year of studies at GSIT and have taken the same courses.

For the data collection, all students will record themselves when they interpret consecutively. Those students who act as speakers as well will be required to submit their prepared text together with a recording of their speech since some changes might be made during the oralization of the

speech.

The analysis of the contents will consist of an examination of samples of each student's presentation and an explication of the errors committed. A comparison of the original and the errors in interpretation will be made. Statistics do not seem particularly applicable because of the small sample size in addition to the fact that linguistic errors do not translate very well into numbers.

4. ANALYSIS OF DATA

The first male student did not have any trouble in conveying the message and main ideas of the speaker. The most blatant grammatical mistakes were the inappropriate use of indefinite and definite articles. For example, in the phrase,

"the former President of United States Nixon..."

the definite article "the" in front of "former" should have been omitted while one should have been inserted before "United States". The most reoccurring addition was the word 'and' at the beginning of a sentence which was more the result of nervousness rather than an expression of meaning. The first student, having spent a few years abroad and learned English during his formative years, did not have trouble pronouncing words. However, overall the interpretation was extremely monotonous and lacked intonation. Compared to English, the Korean language is not characterized by intonation

except to denote a question. If the same monotone is used for English, an English-speaking audience would soon lose interest.

The second male student made more grammatical mistakes than the first. The errors included incorrect use of verb tense, definite and indefinite articles and prepositions. For example, in the sentence,

"As President Kim Young-Sam pointed out, *the* Korea's economy has improved since Kim's government *had* inaugurated."

it would have been more appropriate to say, "As President Kim pointed out, the economy has improved in various sectors since his inauguration." The definite article, "the", in the interpretation is unnecessary and the correct verb auxiliary is "to be" and not "to have" and therefore it should have been "was inaugurated." The lack of precision shown by the second student in the interpretation is most probably due to a faulty note taking technique. The student should be able to keep track of the outline of the speech while jotting down details such as numbers. However, if the student places more energy into note taking without having analyzed the material, he/she will have a more difficult time trying to decipher his notes during interpretation.

This student also had the tendency to begin a sentence with "as you know" and the conjunction "and." "As you know" is an often-used expression in Korean so as not to be too abrupt when starting a sentence. In most cases, it is unnecessary and can be offensive because when referring to domestic subjects, the English-speaking audience will most probably not know. In the same vein, the student began numerous sentences with the

conjunction "and."

The problems in pronunciation consisted of accents on the words. For words such as "program," the student placed the accent on the second syllable rather than on the first and for words such as "campaign," he placed it on the first rather than on the second. Though these are mistakes, they are not serious because an English speaker could probably understand. However, the overall tone of the speech was staccato which made it difficult to follow the interpretation. Unlike the interpretation by the first male student, the second male student's interpretation was more difficult to understand and did not convey the message or intent of the original speech.

The third male student is typical of students who have learned a foreign language through books but have not really experienced it "live." Besides the grammatical mistakes, this student chose words that were inappropriate or were matched awkwardly. For example, in the phrase,

"...set up a program for *fostering* local specialists..."

it would have been more natural to say "set up a program to train local specialists." Another example is

"*Especially* , we need to *cultivate* our ability of *commanding* foreign languages."

A better alternative would be "In particular, we need to enhance our ability to master foreign languages."

This does not seem to be a problem of knowing the appropriate

words but rather one of knowing when to use them. By reading actively and not simply memorizing lists of vocabulary words, the student can come to realize which words accompany other words. Active reading calls for paying greater attention to how ideas are expressed such as what prepositions are used and when definite and indefinite articles are needed. This student did not have any trouble with his pronunciation. At times, the accents on words were misplaced but not enough to confuse a person listening exclusively to the interpretation.

The fourth male student seemed to have a limited range of words from which to choose. This was especially noticeable in the adjectives used.

*"high growth rate, high profitability
good organization, good corporate culture"*

Some options are substantial, sizable, considerable, firm, solid, efficient, stimulating.

One of the linguistic differences between Korean and Western languages is that in Korean, it is not necessary to make a distinction between plural and singular. Consequently, there are numerous instances where the distinction is not made even when speaking in English. For example, in the following passage,

"The book dealt with forty-three U.S. companies which recorded supreme achievement during 20 year period from 1962 to 1982. The company which was target of the survey was famous for high growth rate, high profitability and technical

innovation."

The original read: "Peters and Waterman studied forty three U.S. companies which made the greatest profits, recorded a high growth rate and had the best results from technological innovations during a twenty-year period starting from 1961."

As mentioned by Chu and Park (1979), it was difficult to distinguish between the soft 'g' and 'z.' Therefore, 'encourage' sounded like 'encouraze.' This student also had trouble with accents on words. The word 'employee' appeared very often in the interpretation and each time the accent was placed on the last syllable which became more pronounced every time the word was repeated. The student also had trouble with repetitions and pauses which indicated that the student could not think of the appropriate words and needed more time. The student did not have trouble conveying the message, but he did have difficulty searching for the appropriate words, thereby greatly hampering the general flow of the consecutive interpretation. Though the student had understood the original message, the rendition was not as smooth as it could have been.

The first female student lived abroad for over 15 years and consequently spoke English fluently. An interesting difference is that she has the ability to correct herself while doing the consecutive interpretation. It is always important for the interpreter to listen to him/herself in order to be able to correct any inadvertent mistakes. There are two examples of this self-correction.

- 1) The U.S., Japan, E.U. are all under...are all undergoing economic

difficulties.

- 2) According to a report released by KOTRA, our lack of... decline in international competitiveness is due to the following reasons.

Another mistake that is often made is the use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our.' It is part of Korean culture to consider the whole instead of the individual. Consequently, very often the plural pronouns will be used even if the context suggests that it is an individual. For example, a person who is single and living alone will talk about 'our apartment' and not 'my apartment'; an only child will say 'our parents' and not 'my parents.' The upshot is that Korean speeches are fraught with the use of the first-person plural pronouns which are often translated literally. This can be confusing to English-speaking audiences who may wonder who the 'we' is referring to. In such cases it would be better to specify or when possible omit the pronoun and find another way of expressing the idea. For example, in the sentence,

"This is because *we* lost international competitiveness in the past few years."

the 'we' should be replaced with 'Korea.' This student did not have any trouble pronouncing words and sounded very much like a native speaker. The overall flow was very smooth and there were few repetitions and pauses.

The second female student did not live abroad but has had some practical experience with English. The message was conveyed but the speech did not flow smoothly because of a lack of appropriate linking words and analytical understanding. For example,

"He thought China is the third largest country in the world and its military power is very strong and powerful. And China's influence on other East Asian nations are enormous."

The original was "Nixon also indicated that China is not only growing as the world's third largest economic and military superpower but is also growing more influential in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and in other areas where regional conflicts exist."

This student also had the tendency to translate words literally without finding the appropriate expression in English. For example,

"...bilateral problems should be solved *behind the curtain*"

would have been more appropriately translated as "bilateral problems should be solved behind the scenes." There were no major mistakes in pronunciation except for the letter 'r.' In words such as 'enormous' and 'world,' the 'r' was not pronounced distinctly. Each word was enunciated properly because as a whole the presentation was very slow and laborious.

The third female student spent a year abroad in Australia as an exchange student. The most noticeable error was that of adding the word 'and' in front of numerous sentences. These were totally unnecessary and

seemed to be a habit on the part of the interpreter. For example,

"And recently the U.S. also demand..."

"And the U.S. government complained..."

Other grammatical mistakes included inappropriate use of the definite and indefinite articles, as well as verb tenses. But more important was an insufficient analysis on the part of the interpreter.

"Korea is very slow in opening financial market."

The grammatically correct way of interpreting the original would have been "Korea is very slow in opening *its* financial market."

Pronunciation was also a problem. There were times when words were not pronounced succinctly and therefore hindered comprehension. The one year stay in Australia seemed to have an influence on her pronunciation. It was not a pure Australian accent, but rather a mixture of a Korean and Australian accent. In general, she had trouble pronouncing the letter 'r.' The word 'market' was pronounced 'mah-ket'; 'realize'; and 'we-ah-rize.' She also had trouble distinguishing between 'g' and 'z.' So 'giant' sounded like 'ziant.' In addition to the problems with pronunciation, there were also numerous pauses and repetitions which made it more difficult to follow the interpretation.

The fourth female student also lived abroad for two years studying for an M.B.A. The most obvious mistakes were grammatical; i.e., verb tenses, articles, and plural forms. For example,

"Recently, the U.S. *could open* Japanese market..."

should have been : " Recently, the U.S. opened (or was able to open) the Japanese market."

There were also omissions and inappropriate word choices. A sentence was omitted which was an introduction to the idea and was, therefore, quite important. In addition, there were numerous problems with pronunciation. The most obvious ones had to do with distinguishing between 'r' and 'l' and 'v' and 'b.' There were also numerous pauses between sentences which compounded the problem. The overall presentation was hesitant and lacking in confidence, therefore making it difficult for the audience to believe in the interpreter.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A study of the errors made by second-year students of interpretation revealed that, in most cases, they were very similar to the results found by Barik and Cokely. Omissions, additions, substitutions and semantic errors, as defined by Barik, and intrusions and anomalies, as defined by Cokely, all appeared in the interpretations performed by second-year students.

The errors can also be categorized into omissions, additions, substitutions, grammatical, pronunciation, meaning and others. In numerous cases, the grammatical mistakes were rooted in the inability of the student to apply his/her knowledge of grammar to actual performance. Therefore, it is not a matter of lack of knowledge on the part of the students but rather a

matter of the lack of application. Depending on how a text is viewed, all errors can fall into the meaning category because the underlying philosophy of conference interpretation is that if the interpreter understands the message, he/she will not have any trouble delivering it to the audience, given a certain linguistic proficiency level. Comprehension equals performance. As long as the original text is understood properly, the audience will be able to understand the message despite a few grammatical mistakes. In other words, there is a difference between declarative and procedural knowledge or knowing that and knowing how. In many cases, errors were not rooted in lack of knowledge but rather in pressure to perform. There is a distinction between competence and performance or latent and passive knowledge and active knowledge. Active knowledge has been treated in research as a manifestation of what is already known by the speaker, but in cases where the speaker is put under pressure because of time, stage fright, and a need to perform, the speaker will not be able to manifest all of his/her knowledge. This can be verified by indicating the mistake to the student/interpreter, after the performance, and seeing his/her reaction. For simple grammatical errors, in most cases, the students had the ability to correct themselves.

Interpretation errors are mainly rooted in faulty comprehension. When the linguistic level is not at the standard required, faulty comprehension can, in turn, be manifested through linguistic unintelligibility. Given a certain linguistic proficiency level, what is clearly understood can be expressed in another language. The instructor needs to make a conscious effort to distinguish between linguistic incompetence and lack of understanding in interpretive skills. These are noticeable when the student focuses on words without conveying the logic and essence of the message.

Ideally, all the students should have the necessary linguistic proficiency level and schools of interpretation would simply teach interpretive skills. Though that does occur in some schools of interpretation, it is not the case at GSIT where less than half the student body has actually spent some time abroad. It is therefore up to the instructors to distinguish between poor linguistic competencies and a lack of mastery in interpretive skills.

There are several stages that the student may not have mastered. The first is listening, followed by comprehension/analysis and finally speech/output. First, listening must be active. The student must be able to distinguish between words and meaning/message. If the student lacks linguistic competence, the speech will be meaningless noise such as when one hears an unfamiliar foreign language being spoken. If the student has passed the rigorous entrance exam, the language spoken will be understood as speech and not simply noise. The difference, however, lies between simple understanding and actually digesting the information and following the logical development of a speech. For example, in the course of everyday life, listening or watching the news on television is not a very active activity unless the story is of interest, then attention will become more focused on the broadcast and then revert back to a passive activity when it is over.

Comprehension/analysis is probably the most difficult aspect of interpretation to teach. When a student does not analyze the text and gives a word-for-word interpretation, it is unfailingly very flat and uninteresting because the subtleties of the original text are missing. The Korean language is based on a different form of logic than that of Western languages. Link words such as "but," "however," "therefore," "moreover," can be and are used on different occasions. A Korean speech can also be very repetitive and

oblique. If an interpreter stays on the linguistic level and simply transposes words, the logic of the original text will not be delivered as it was meant to be delivered. Repetition and the use of link words are not unusual in Korean and therefore do not diminish the speech in any way. However, if the same speech styles are used in English, it would not reflect well on the speaker and would, therefore, give a negative impression to the audience. In other words, the same message would not be conveyed and so the interpreter has not been faithful to the original.

Speech/output is probably the most important stage of interpretation because it is the yardstick by which an interpreter is judged. Many elements come into play when the interpreter puts on a performance. The word 'performance' is not used lightly because when an interpreter "interprets," it does equal an artistic performance. Interpretation contains all the elements of a performance. There is a period of preparation. The interpreter/performer has to overcome stage fright, nervousness and tension for the actual performance and when it is all over, there is often applause and recognition for the interpreter as well as the speakers.

This study has demonstrated that the number of years spent abroad can influence the performance of the student under certain conditions. If the student has spent less than two years abroad as an adult, very often it does not have a positive impact on the level of English. However, even a relatively short stay (about two years) during the formative years of grammar school does seem to have a positive influence on the language, mainly in pronunciation and ease with the language. A lot of students who have learned English in textbooks have difficulty expressing themselves in simple and concise sentences. The words used are often like those found in

written form and not those that are normally used in every day speech.

Having lived abroad at a young age does not mean, however, that the analytical capacities are enhanced. The students who spent a year as an exchange student or two years studying for a master's degree in English-speaking countries did not make fewer grammatical mistakes or have less trouble understanding the original message. Further the general delivery was not improved. The only advantage is probably that the students come to understand what other cultures and peoples are like.

Though it is often said that females are more linguistically inclined while males have a more scientific and mathematical mind, the students in this study did not show such a distinction. The female student who did stand out from the rest had spent almost twenty years in foreign countries and had, therefore, learned English from a very young age. She was by far the best student in terms of linguistic proficiency level, comprehension, and analysis of the text. Among the other students, the differences between male and female students were minimal. One interesting characteristic for the male students in this study was that they all have some experience outside of school, either in the military or actual job experience which added to their general knowledge as to how things operate. The female students, however, for the most part, lacked this worldly knowledge which is not an insurmountable problem. It can easily be overcome by working in a company for about a year or so.

Conference interpretation is still a young field compared to other disciplines which opens the possibilities for research. First and foremost, a knowledge base must be built before experiments can be conducted in interpretation. Basically, knowing and knowledge are not equal. Studies into

teaching methodology can open the options instructors have for teaching. Whatever the studies undertaken, it is important that professional conference interpreters be consulted regarding the subject matter and how the study is conducted.

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