Meaning and Meaning Processing in Interpretation and Interpreting Teaching

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Abstract
Starting with the cognitive approach to meaning the French School of interpretation headed by Seleskovitch and Lederer is based on, this paper studies meaning as a deverbalized product, related to the substantive memory, and discusses its processing in terms of conceptualizing. Since meaning processing/comprehension largely depends on the interpreter’s anticipation ability, the main anticipation cues, i.e. co-textual (intralingual), extralinguistic (situational) and context independent are identified and the “smart” shadow reading technique is described as a means of developing anticipation skills in interpreting trainees.

Deverbalized Meaning

Interpretation/interpreting is generally defined as oral translation and perceived as a more or less mechanical activity consisting in a series of encoding and decoding operations. Seleskovitch (1989: 8, 9) rejects this common perception - “It is not the oral translation of words” - and describes interpreting/interpretation as a complex and demanding activity: “it uncovers a meaning and makes it explicit for others. (...) Interpretation is communication, i.e. analysis of the original message and its conversion

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into a form accessible to the listener. (...) The process broken into its three stages, is roughly as follows:

1. Auditory perception of a linguistic utterance which carries meaning. Apprehension of the language and comprehension of the message through a process of analysis and exegesis.
2. Immediate and deliberate discarding of the wording and retention of the mental representation of the message (concepts, ideas, etc.)
3. Production of a new utterance in the target language which must meet a dual requirement: it must express the original message in its entirety and it must be geared to the recipient.”

The model she proposes is based on an assumed cognitive approach, intended to “shed light on the mental processes which make possible the virtually instantaneous transmission of an oral message into another language.” (Seleskovitch 1989: 9, emphasis added), and on a theory of meaning apt to account for deverbalized meaning or meaning beyond words.

Meaning is what remains after the “immediate and deliberate discarding of the wording”, it is “the retention of the mental representation of the message” – as mentioned in the above description of interpretation.

Meaning in interpretation is dependent, according to Seleskovitch’s theory “not only on us but also on the person we are addressing and on the context in which we both find ourselves.” (1989: 12, emphasis added). This description of meaning as a variable of an extralinguistic context prefigures the communicative value discourse analysis approaches attach to it. (Bell 1984:162).

Seleskovitch connects this communicative meaning to a particular type of memory, the “substantive memory (…) a function of comprehension” (1989: 36, emphasis added). This memory retains/stores what has previously been understood/processed and is contrasted with the verbatim memory which retains words. Following Seleskovitch’s line of thought it is unlikely in the extreme that a person with an excellent verbatim memory but without any substantive memory could make a good interpreter.

Questionable in some of its theoretical assumptions, according to some theorists, e.g. the deverbalization of the message, Seleskovitch’s model remains the most coherent and comprehensive approach to interpreting and an important source of inspiration to all interpreting trainers.
Since grasping and/or processing of the meaning seems to be the crucial phase of any interpreting performance, the training of interpreters should properly deal with it in terms of techniques and time allotted to practice.

Meaning Processing: Conceptualizing

Comprehension/processing of the meaning is difficult in either mode of interpreting, i.e. consecutive or simultaneous, owing to the oral nature of the message. In simultaneous, however, it seems impossible to achieve. Simultaneous interpreting – “an unnatural exercise (un exercice contre nature) as Selekovitch (Selekovitch and Lederer 1989: 128, emphasis added) qualifies this mode – makes it almost impossible for the interpreter to dissociate source language from target language. Being intensely exposed to the former and having to produce the latter almost instantly, the interpreter has no time to process meaning and therefore he is most liable to translate words instead of meaning.

Based on a study of real-life simultaneous interpreting situations, Marianne Lederer has identified eight operations interpreters have to perform. These operations may occur either sequentially or concurrently at various times in the simultaneous interpreting performance. These are:

a) hearing;
b) understanding the language;
c) conceptualizing (building a cognitive reminiscence by integrating sequences of connected speech into pre-existing knowledge);
d) enunciating (what has been stored in the substantive memory);
e) getting/being aware of the interpreting situation;
f) checking audio-equipment;
g) transferring;
h) recalling of particular signifiers

(Selekovitch and Lederer 1989:131, our translation)

We shall focus on conceptualizing which stands for the actual processing of meaning. All interpreting theorists agree that the success of this operation largely depends on pre-existing knowledge – a tremendously vast area including general knowledge, linguistic knowledge, specific knowledge: on the topic to be discussed, on the conference/meeting to be held, etc.

Pre-existing knowledge is considered a prerequisite for comprehension. Seleskovitch says “Comprehension is what occurs when new information ties in with related knowledge.
If such knowledge is absent the new information is ignored.” (1989: 49). Other theorists express the same opinion highlighting the capital importance of preparation for interpreting tasks: “For the interpreter, the process of comprehension is much more complicated. He has no time to use dictionaries or consult an expert. The only way the interpreter can affect the process of comprehension is by taking pre-emptive action before the message is actually communicated, through exhaustive preparation, both lexical and conceptual, of the subject matter concerned. In this sense, no interpreting instructor can ever put sufficient emphasis on the issue of preparation.” (Presentacion Padilla & Anne Martin 1992: 196, emphasis added).

The pre-emptive action the interpreter should take is meant to help him/her to anticipate meaning, i.e. to gasp it before it is actually expressed in words. Anticipation as Leaderer (1978: 323-332) points out might be of two types: anticipation based on sense expectation and anticipation based on language prediction “as when the components of stock collocations like ‘play … a role’ or ‘shoulder … responsibility’ are separated by long stretches of intervening text” (Setton 1994: 194). The former obviously refers to general knowledge while the latter is relevant to purely linguistic knowledge.

Wills (1978: 323-332) distinguishes three types of what he calls anticipation cues:

- co-textual (intralingual)
- extralinguistic (situational)
- context-independent cues,

those reflecting a knowledge of standardized communication process (‘on behalf of my delegation I would like to … thank’) as well as of clichés or “petrified”, idiomatic phrases (collocations). The co-textual and context-independent cues are linguistic in nature as opposed to the extralinguistic or situational.

**Teaching Comprehension: Smart Shadowing**

As “consciousness-raising” with a view to anticipation Setton proposes exercises in which “speeches are read out, or tapes of speakers projected, after the trainees have been filled in on as much as they would be expected to know about the event, situation, players, place and so on. The tape or speaker stops occasionally and students try to continue the sentence” (Setton 1994: 193).

A further step towards conceptualizing may be achieved by “smart” shadowing or real time paraphrase exercises. The technique is described in detail by Setton (1994: 193, original emphasis): “‘smart’ shadowing has been very well received by our students and
appears so far to be the most effective way of guiding students into coherent simultaneous interpreting.

At first ‘processing units’ are suggested by the instructor by pauses at possible sense-unit boundaries. Students can be encouraged to make complete syntactic units (even sentences) at each pause. Over a period of six to eight class hours the various dimensions of the problem are introduced in steps:

- reader or speaker *pauses after incomplete sense units*: students’ attention is drawn to various strategies: holding pattern; filler material (depending on length of pause or delay before next ‘clue’ is heard); ‘open’ grammar.
- *pauses are shortened*: trainees learn to keep listening while talking, finish their sentences etc.
- *the stop-go flow glides into normal speech*

Time off is taken for suggestions as to opening structures, instructor demonstrations, and comments on lagging and leading”.

**Conclusion**

As we tried to suggest in this paper interpreting training methods are inspired and generated by theory, theory is based on empirical evidence, theory and practice, formalisation and intuition can hardly be separated in an activity as complex as interpretation.

**References**