

Importance of Nonverbal Communication in Simultaneous Interpreting

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Abstract

This article deals with quality assessment in simultaneous interpreting based on the importance of nonverbal communication. Our aim is to set out to build on – and add to – the state of the art in research on user's expectations and extend the concern with quality criteria to include actual product assessment by different types of listeners. The results of our study show a clear separation between quality and the perceived quality or success of a simultaneous interpretation. The users are not good judges of quality because they are not in a position to perform this task. In our opinion, this means that users not only desire but in fact demand, albeit implicitly, a certain degree of intrusion or active involvement on the part of the interpreter. As far as intonation is concerned, the interpreter should feel free to improve on the delivery of the speaker.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, quality and assessment of simultaneous interpreting

1. Objectives

Empirical research on the expectations of interpreters as well as end-users indicates that the former are generally more demanding, but that pleasant voice and intonation are not important criteria in the assessment of interpretation quality in either of the two groups (Kurz, 1989, 1993). Drawing on this research and on the presuppositions that had guided other empirical work on user expectations of quality in interpreting, our aim is to achieve the following objectives:

- a) to determine the quality expectations of a specific group of end-users of simultaneous interpretation (SI),
- b) to determine the quality expectations of professional interpreters, both in their role as speakers and in their role as listeners,
- c) to test the hypothesis whereby monotonous intonation in SI is perceived both by users who are specialists in the subject matter and by professional interpreters,

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- d) to test the hypothesis whereby monotonous intonation in SI has a negative effect on judgments of quality made both by professional interpreters and by specialist users,
- e) to test the hypothesis whereby monotonous intonation in SI has a negative effect on how users and interpreters evaluate other, more subjective criteria, such as professional performance or the degree of confidence that the interpreter inspires in the users.

In the course of our study, it emerged that the actual evaluation of the output does not necessarily correspond with the users' or interpreters' declared expectations. This motivated the decision to analyse how groups of end-users behave when they evaluate the criterion of sense consistency with the original message.

2. Methodology

In preparatory phase our goal was to measure the effect of the criteria intonation and sense consistency with the original message on the basis of different versions of the interpretation of the same original text. Therefore, three video-recordings of SI were made: (1) with monotonous intonation and fully consistent with the sense of the original discourse, (2) with lively intonation, but not fully consistent with the sense of the original discourse, and (3) with lively intonation and fully consistent with the sense of the original discourse.

The three versions were interpretations into Polish of the same original speech in Italian. Given that our objective was to measure the effect of monotonous intonation in SI, we decided that the original speech should also be delivered monotonously by the speaker. In this way, if our hypotheses were confirmed, the results obtained would allow future research to study if, in the case of a more lively original speech, monotonous intonation might cause the users to evaluate the interpretation even more negatively. It would also be possible to study how monotonous intonation in SI affected the subjects' evaluation of the original speech. This could open a new line of research on the role of the interpreter. These considerations led to the specification of the characteristics of the original Italian speech.

The text chosen was an example of highly specialised legal discourse with numerous references to the Italian Constitution and to jurisprudence of the Italian Constitutional Court.

The text had to be shortened since its duration under normal conditions would have been excessive (approximately 40 minutes) and would have prevented some subjects from taking part in the experiment. The length of the text was thus reduced to 10 minutes (2 285 syllables). The speech was delivered in Italian and was situated in a specific context: a seminar on the funding of political parties in Europe. The speaker chosen to play the role of professor of Italian Constitutional Law was Angelo Rinella – Facolta' di Giurisprudenza, Libera Universita' Maria Ss. Assunta (Rome).

Whereas the manipulation of the intonation took place when the video was actually being taped, the manipulation of the other criterion – sense consistency with the original message – had to be carried out prior to the recording. Although we had a

published written translation of the original speech, this text was hardly credible as a simultaneous interpretation because of the complexity of its syntactic structure. We therefore had to verify what an actual interpretation of the speech would be like. For this purpose, the speech was read by a colleague in the SI lab and three professional interpreters interpreted it into Polish. Their interpretations were recorded and compared. The syntactic structure of the written translation was then modified in all instances where at least two of the three interpretations coincided. The final result was the version of the interpretation used in videos 1 and 3 in which there are no content errors. Because of a slight modification in the text, video 1 comprises 3 011 syllables, while video 3 comprises 3 088 syllables.

On the basis of this oral version of the translation we produced video 2 by inserting the content errors. This version of the interpretation has a total of 3 009 syllables. We basically introduced six types of content errors:

- *errors in the transmission of numbers* (e.g. of articles in the Italian legal code, quantities and dates),
- *omissions* (e.g. of restrictions on donations to political parties),
- *changes in gradation* (e.g. describing something impossible as being difficult),
- *incoherence* (e.g. saying that the Italian legal code exhaustively regulates the funding of political parties and subsequently stating just the opposite),
- *additions* (e.g. where the original text states that the Italian legal code establishes an obligation, the interpreter says that it *clearly* establishes an obligation),
- *incorrect transmission of meaning* (e.g. the affirmation that the state cannot limit the free development of political parties was turned into the assertion that the state in fact sets limits to their development; the meaning of the original is thus misrepresented so that the interpretation gives listeners a totally erroneous concept of how political parties are funded in Italy).

This constituted the video material which served as the basis of our experiments: three different versions of SI superimposed as a voice-over on the video of the original speech.

3. Method

The subjects who participated in our experiment were 15 legal experts, who also answered the user expectation questionnaire. They were divided alphabetically into three groups of 5.

The results of this study (calculated as percentages) were presented according to the order of the questionnaire: overall assessment of the interpretation; native accent; pleasant voice; fluency of delivery; logical cohesion of utterance; sense consistency with original message; completeness of interpretation; use of correct terminology; style; intonation; diction; professionalism; reliability; evaluation of the original speech.

Among the most important findings (obtained in our study) we would like to highlight the following.

1. *Evaluation of intonation*: the monotonous intonation of the interpreter was clearly detected by the users.
2. *Evaluation of sense consistency with the original message*: the results obtained appear to indicate that the users did not detect the content errors inserted in version 2 of the interpretation. This confirms Gile's findings (1995) regarding consecutive interpretation. The monotonous intonation tends to be associated with poorer ratings for this criterion.
3. *Overall assessment of the interpretation*: the users' judgments were evidently influenced by the difference in intonation. Since the criterion *sense consistency with the original message* could not be evaluated by the subjects, it did not influence their overall assessment of the interpretation to any significant degree.

4. Conclusions

The results of our study show a clear separation between quality and the perceived quality or success of a simultaneous interpretation. The users are not good judges of quality, simply because they are not in a position to perform this task. If we compare the results obtained in the assessment study with subjects' prior expectations, we find that user expectations clearly relate to the concept of quality, but not to the actual perception of quality or success. The expectations of the subjects did not prove decisive, either for their assessment or for the relative importance and actual weight they attached to the different criteria. In our opinion, this means that users not only desire but in fact demand, albeit implicitly, a certain degree of intrusion or active involvement on the part of the interpreter. Even though the speaker's delivery of the original was monotonous, the high ratings obtained by versions 2 and 3 in comparison to version 1 seem to indicate that the interpreter should assume the conscious role of professional communicator and go beyond the "ghost role" (Kopczyński, 1994). Clearly, further research is necessary in order to ascertain the limits to which the interpreter should go in his or her active involvement in the communication process. However, our results show that, as far as intonation is concerned, the interpreter should feel free to improve on the delivery of the speaker, at least at the levels examined in this study.

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