

## SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING: A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract.** This article discusses simultaneous interpreting (SI) from the viewpoint of procedural competence, whose evolution may be followed and monitored through the changes intervening within implicit and explicit tasks performed. As a goal-oriented communicative activity, SI may be analysed through the strategies applied to achieve the communicative goal. The interpreter, first during his studies and then throughout his career, develops and constantly refines a strategic behaviour integrating conscious and unconscious strategies. Strategies are a dynamic concept, useful not only for the description of processoriented aspects of SI, but also as a teaching tool orienting the study and for devising exercises that help automatize specific interpreting solutions.

**Keywords:** interpreting strategies, implicit competence, procedural knowledge, simultaneous interpreting.

### INTRODUCTION

Half a century ago, in the 1950s, the first manuals and articles on conference interpreting appeared (Herbert 1952, Rozan, 1956). At that time, the first generation of modern interpreters must have felt the urge to collect and systematize their experience and knowledge of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, gained working experience within international organizations for many years and passed it on to future generations of interpreters. Since there was an increasing demand for and interest in the profession, the time was ripe for recoding in written form what they had already been teaching orally in interpreting classes.

### MATERIAIS AND METHODS

While the basic principles of simultaneous and consecutive interpreting have remained consistent through the decades, teaching methods have evolved incorporating results and insight from other disciplines and adapted to the changing working environment. Nowadays, not only are new interpreting forms rapidly gaining ground, but also requested language combinations differ from the past, the most striking example being the EU institutions, before and after enlargement.

Conference interpreting trainers in Italy, and likely elsewhere too, are confronted with the challenge of applying teaching methods that will lead to the acquisition of interpreting skills in the most efficient way within the prescribed time. Together with constant updating, the objective is to conceive a method applicable to different domains or topics, although in most cases language skills and encyclopaedic knowledge will not be up to the mark. To this end, an understanding of how the processes underlying SI are developed and acquired is essential, because it offers

explanations of what is happening and what must be concentrated on during training. The strategies applied to achieve the communicative goal intrinsic to simultaneous interpreting are useful in this respect, because, while showing the relation between the original discourse and the interpreted text, they can indicate what interpreting solutions have been applied by the interpreter, taking into account the communicative setting in which they were carried out. In addition to strategies, norms are another possible approach to the interpreted text (cf. Shlesinger 2000), the difference between the two lying in their dynamic or static character. Strategies aim at highlighting the process, they are process-oriented, while norms are the rule behind the strategy; their application can be detected in the interpreted text, they are product-oriented. In this paper, the process-oriented approach is chosen and SI is examined from the viewpoint of procedural competence, whose evolution may be followed and monitored through the changes intervening within implicit and explicit tasks performed.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Speaking and listening in the mother tongue or in a very well-known language are spontaneous processes requiring very little effort. However, we often tend to forget how long it has taken to learn them, how many exercises, drills, errors they have been through, how much work and concentration has been needed to reach the present state of ability and knowledge.

Every time we listen to somebody speaking, we enter a new world of sounds, words and images. From a continuous flow of sounds, we segment strings of phonemes and group them into syllables, words, sentences. We recognize meaningful units. To do so, we draw on cognitive resources like memory and attention and activate the cerebral areas where our knowledge of the language, the world, communicative events, culture and the subject matter as well as their relevant connections are stored. It is then possible to understand what is being said and, during this process, we form concepts and thoughts. During the listening process our role is mainly passive because we are exposed to the linguistic communicative behaviour of the speaker, to his/her choice of language and style. Nevertheless, to extract meaning from the utterances heard, our cognitive activity becomes reactive. We react to what we hear and this reaction is possible only because we are actively constructing a concept, an image of what is being said.

The aim of teaching conference interpreting is to transform students' language skills, their present implicit competence, into new, implicit, procedural competence enhancing at the same time their declarative knowledge, their knowledge of different subject matters, such as economy, EU policies or international institutions. Declarative knowledge is achieved through deliberate learning by focalized attention and integrates information from various modalities; history, geography, but also terminology are cases in point. Procedural knowledge relates to action programmes and procedures, typical examples being playing an instrument by ear, language

production, words used in context, language structures; they are all the result of implicit automatic processes.

A viable method for observing the evolution of implicit and explicit components as well as the interaction of automatic and non-automatic skills in SI, is the comparison of students and professionals. Differences and similarities in their SI performance highlights the evolution and acquisition of SI competence. In a study comparing interpreting results of advanced interpreting students and professionals, Riccardi (1996, 1998) pointed to the interaction of two main categories of strategies during SI, knowledge-based strategies and skill-based strategies.

Skill-based strategies may be defined as all those strategies governed by stored patterns of automatic responses whose application is triggered by the recognition of a well-known stimulus within the communicative event. They are the result of procedural knowledge and have been internalized and automatized by the interpreter. Their use confers spontaneity and fluency upon output. Therefore, they may come into play at all levels – pragmatic, semantic, textual or morphological – and are closely dependent on the interpreter’s knowledge organization and SI experience.

The strategic behaviour of interpreters is a recurrent object of research into SI. Some studies examine the use of single, specific strategies such as anticipation (Iederer 1978; Moser 1978 Wilss 1978) while others adopt an overall approach (Kirchhoff 1976; Kohn and Kalina 1996; Kalina 1998). Gile (1995) uses the term of ‘coping tactics’ to refer to conscious solutions implemented by the interpreter to contrast processing capacity overload and knowledge base inadequacy.

The most common categorization distinguishes between comprehension, production, overall and emergency strategies. Comprehension strategies generally include, anticipation, segmentation, selection of information, stalling or waiting, while production strategies consist of compression, expansion, approximation strategies, generalization, use of linguistic open-end forms, morphosyntactic transformation and the use of prosody elements, such as pauses and intonation. Décalage and monitoring are counted among the overall strategies, while emergency strategies may include, for example, the omission of text segments, transcoding and parallel reformulation. As for every classification, strategy categories are not always homogeneous among researchers and sometimes the borders between comprehension and production or production and emergency strategies are blurred.

## **CONCLUSION**

Strategies have proved a useful instrument both in research and teaching, because they point to typical interpreting occurrences resulting from the SI process. They may, therefore, be grouped into general interpreting strategies, independent of the language pair used, or into language pair-specific strategies, taking into account

solutions imposed by structural and lexical diversities of the languages used (Riccardi 1999). Again, the choice will depend upon the research or teaching aim.

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