

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROSODIC FEATURES IN SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING

THE CASE OF SPANISH-SLOVENE SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the importance of combining phonetics research with the research in conference interpreting. The conclusions of the case study of simultaneous conference interpreting from Spanish into Slovene show that the prosodic elements (intonation, accent, pauses and pronunciation of particular sounds in the source language) as well as the speed of speaking have a great influence on the perception and understanding of the message delivered in the source language (Spanish) and on its correct transmission into the target language (Slovene) by the interpreter who is only an intermediate addressee, however, the most important element in this kind of communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conference interpreting is a relatively young activity which came into being in the period between the two world wars and was for a long time only a practical activity, an example of applied linguistics. Only more recently conference interpreting has become an object of research. The research was mainly oriented to pedagogical issues (error analysis, aptitude testings, quality in conference interpreting, skill components, comprehension, memory), to neuropsychological research, to concrete interpreting issues (machine interpreting, videoconferencing), but curiously enough very few studies of conference interpreting and phonetics were published. The opposite situation would be normal since simultaneous interpreting is an oral activity, a twofold communication with the interpreter in the middle playing a primordial role in the process of communication. The phonetic features are of great importance for perceiving and passing through the message.

In Slovenia conference interpretation has a rather long tradition. The Association of Conference Interpreters of Slovenia was founded in the beginning of 1973 and its active members mainly work as free lance interpreters. They cover a great number of languages and work in both modalities of conference interpreting: the consecutive and the simultaneous. Conference interpreting is becoming more and more important for Slovenia especially since 1992 when Slovenia gained independence and became an active member of the international community (member of UNO, Council of Europe, WTO and many other international organizations, candidate for a full membership of the European Union, NATO, etc.). The need of producing good conference interpreters has become urgent and with it the importance of good training and relevant research studies of this branch of applied linguistics.

2. CASE STUDIES

2.1. Introduction

Although in Slovenia the language combination Spanish Slovene for simultaneous conference interpreting is rather rare due to an unexplained reduced number of international conferences with Spanish as a working language held in Slovenia, we concentrated on the study of this particular language combination. This situation tends to change as there is an increased interest of Slovenes in Spanish language at all levels. The aim of the study was to understand better the errors of interpretation due to misunderstanding the original speaker in Spanish and to use these results to improve our training programme at the Faculty of Arts of Ljubljana. The number of interpreters who participated in this research was six, four of them working into Slovene from Spanish and two of them working in both directions Slovene into Spanish and Spanish into Slovene. The study was restricted only to the language combination Spanish - Slovene and in the phonetic/prosodic features of the original speaker in Spanish which could have some influence on the rendering correctly the message into Slovene. The environment of this empirical study was twofold : a natural one, that is, the scope of the real conference, and an artificially created conference environment (interpreting taped conferences and speeches delivered by a native speaker in the university teaching laboratory). The method was that of listening to interpreters, analyzing the taped interpretations and discussing the problems with interpreters themselves. All the interpreters were Slovene native speakers although two of them have lived in Spanish speaking countries for a long time.

2.2. Some phonetic and prosodic features which could be responsible for errors in transmitting the message

In this section some phonetic and prosodic features in Spanish which presumably may cause some difficulties for interpreters, native Slovene speakers, working from Spanish into Slovene are presented.

The Spanish vowel system is, in comparison with the Slovene vowel system, very simple and symmetric and for the Slovene speaker doesn't represent a great difficulty, therefore in the interpreting from Spanish into Slovene by Slovene interpreters the Spanish vowel system is not a problem, but it would be in the opposite situation, if a native Spanish interpreter would work from Slovene into Spanish, which for the time being is not the case.

Spanish and Slovene consonants do not differ considerably. Nevertheless for the native Slovene interpreters working from

Spanish some difficulties may be caused by the fricative variants of bilabial voiced plosives /β ð ɣ/ which appear in positions other than initial and not after nasal (and lateral for d), the fricative interdental voiceless sound /θ/ typical for the Spanish spoken in the larger part of Spain and the two alveolar vibrant phonemes (simple /r/ and multiple /rr/) because they don't exist in Slovene. Other features of Spanish consonantism which may create an obstacle in understanding the message are the neutralization of phonemes in the case of the phenomena as "yeísmo" and "seseo" and the consequential loss of the distinctive value of the phonemes in different parts of the Spanish speaking world, and the tendency of the consonants in final position of the word or syllable to aspiration or to disappear, mainly in some Caribbean regions.

It is well known that intonation may affect meaning and perception and that intonational choices facilitate or obstruct communication. Therefore the intonation in simultaneous interpreting has a relevant role. The Slovene intonational patterns generally speaking don't differ very much from the Spanish ones. Both have the general patterns of falling nuclei, rising nuclei and neutral nuclei for different kinds of utterances, but the different combinations of these nuclei can signalized different kinds of emotional involvement of the speaker and different degrees of expressivity and may change the message. It is therefore important for the interpreter to detect these changes and pass them through into the other language. The interpreter must also pay attention to two important prosodic features, carriers of meaning: the stress and the pauses. Spanish has a regular stress on one syllable (except some adverbs of mode), but there exists also the so called "acento afectivo o enfático" which stresses another syllable in a particular word to which the speaker wants to convey meaning.

2.3. Main problems the interpreter has to cope with

After examining the recorded interpretations and comparing them with the original speeches, having analyzed them with the interpreters and having discussed other problems we concluded that the biggest interference in perceiving the message comes from the speed of Spanish speakers, a fact that causes the above-mentioned phonetic and prosodic difficulties even greater.

Apart from speed we found the following phonetic and prosodic features to obstruct more or less the message delivered in the target language:

-The aspiration and/or disappearance of the fricative alveolar voiceless /s/ in position at the end of the syllable or word as for instance the disappearance of the mark of plural /s/ (todo lo niño) and consequently the lengthening of the last vowel / todo: lo: niño: /. In combination with speed this phenomenon causes in the interpreter hesitation, subsequently loss of time and missing part of the message.

-The interpreters also complain about some Latinoamerican speakers which would drop the last syllable of the words especially at the end of phonic groups, which forces them to guess or infer the meaning of the message or wait for the next portion of speech to render it correctly, which is always a danger because important portions of discourse can be lost if you are not fast enough.

-The intonation of speakers may not be such a problem for the interpreter when the conference is an official meeting about routine matters or a scientific symposium where emotions are mostly absent of the speeches. But in meetings where matters of importance are discussed and speakers try to defend their positions vividly and attack other points of view, it is a problem for the interpreter to render this excitement in the Slovene language as Slovene speakers are more sober and less temperamental as the Spanish speakers can be. There is a problem not only in rendering the great number of epithets but also the appropriate stress and rhythm. All this in conjunction with speed, which is so characteristic for Spanish speakers, makes the task rather difficult for the interpreters who work into Slovene. In our case they mainly tried to deliver the meaning of the ideas expressed and to convey somehow the atmosphere of excitement and agitation with more rhythm, stress and, curiously enough, speaking louder and quicker.

-The social origin of the native speakers and the use of dialectal elements, the social registry, the rhetorical capacity as well as the provenance of the speakers (from different parts of Spanish speaking world) were also emphasized by our interpreters as problems in perceiving the message and putting the speech correctly into the target language. In the international conferences the speakers usually are educated people and use a neutral and correct Spanish without many regionalisms avoiding typical melodic curves and intonational patterns from their country of origin. The differences between different variants of Spanish on the phonetic-prosodic level are obvious (for instance the Spanish variants from Spain, Argentina and Mexico differ quite a lot on this level) and the interpreters must get used to them.

-The interpreters stressed the difficulties they have when Spanish native speakers pronounce foreign words and names as they lose time to recognize those words and names and have problems to catch up with the ongoing speech.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Most of our conjectures about the importance of above-mentioned prosodic and phonetic features at transmitting the message were shown to be correct. We noticed especially the importance of coping with speed, which shows to be an important obstructing element to understanding the source language and producing the speech correctly in the target language. Both speed and prosodic features sometimes have the power to blur the main idea. Therefore they, as well as other non-verbal communication features of the speakers, have to be taken into account in the training programmes of our interpreters. The above described analysis points out also the elements we have to consider when we work in this special language combination. We must not forget the situation a conference interpreter finds her/himself in: she/he is in a sound proof booth, she/he does not always have a good view of the speaker whose message she/he has to render as accurately as possible. It is a stressing situation in which the interpreter has to indulge at the same time in a series of mental activities (listening, understanding, analysing and re-expressing [2]). There are two main difficulties in simultaneous interpreting, an acoustic one (the interpreter has to

speak and listen at the same time) and the intellectual one (the lack of the whole context, as the interpreter must follow the original speaker closely). It is of great importance for the interpreters to maintain as much as possible eye-contact with delegates in the conference room because non verbal communication helps them in many cases to solve some problems of understanding. We hope that the results of this research, although carried out with a small sample, will encourage the interdisciplinary research in phonetics and conference interpreting, help our teaching strategies in conference interpreting and improve our own interpreting.

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