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Perspectives on extralinguistic knowledge and anticipation in conference interpreting



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Simultaneous interpreting (SI), often referred to as conference interpreting, is a complex cognitive activity in which the interpreter converts ideas expressed in one language into another language with the aim of bridging a communication gap. It can occur in all kinds of multilingual settings, especially in meetings with delegates or representatives. Knowledge, both linguistic and extralinguistic, is required to facilitate this communication process.

The critical role of extralinguistic or background knowledge has been underscored by many SI researchers. Proper background and situational knowledge are indispensable for interpreters who seek to grasp understanding beyond literal meaning. Background knowledge is considered by many researchers to be as important as command of language in understanding speech. Background knowledge is a broad term covering various “cognitive complements” that help us understand speech. These include knowledge of the world, of time and place, of the circumstances out of which an utterance arises, memory of things said previously, and knowing the identities of the speaker and the listeners.

Similarly, anticipation is generally accepted as an important aspect of SI even though anticipation strategies and skills are often applied unconsciously. Anticipation can generally be defined as the utterance of a word, idea or message in the output before it actually appears in the input when an interpreter is “online”. The literature on this topic reveals that different authors varyingly address anticipation as a cognitive process, a creative skill, a coping strategy or a statistical probability. One particularity of SI is that “it is clear that the interpreter must often begin a sentence without knowing exactly where that sentence is going”. Anticipation can be used to manage this difficulty, and will be enhanced if the interpreter can draw on other knowledge available to them.

Much SI research focuses on the analysis of a cognitive paradigm that seeks to explain interpreted utterances with reference to mental processes only, and does not address interactional contexts or interpreter attitudes to conference interpreting. Even if several cognitive processes may become automatic in the course of a professional interpreter’s career, the “situational characteristics (such as place, participants, subject matter and issues to be discussed) change with every assignment”, according to Horvath (2010). Interpreters themselves are present in the communicative context of a conference and can be viewed as active partners in communication. In this type of situation, they use a range of skills, including anticipation, to predict what is going to be said and what is going to happen next.

In SI, the interpreter’s ability to anticipate is defined on the one hand by linguistic competence – knowledge of syntactic and semantic regularities in the source language and the use of information from previously processed speech – and on the other hand by situational knowledge, especially the role of speaker and their usual conduct, as well as the interpreter’s prior knowledge of the subject. This indicates that linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge both have an influence on anticipation. On the other hand, the attitudes of interpreters themselves to this influence remain less evident. The purpose of this study was to explore interpreter attitudes to and awareness

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of anticipation, and how these are influenced by extralinguistic knowledge, by analysing and discussing qualitative data collected via an online survey. Ten participants, either confirmed or novice conference interpreters (from a range of language pairs including French-English, Italian-English and Chinese-English) with experience in SI in conference settings, completed the survey. In this study it was assumed that anticipation is present in SI regardless of the language pairs involved, and any influence exerted by difference in syntactic structures was not examined.

The results with regard to interpreter perceptions relating to extralinguistic knowledge, linguistic knowledge and anticipation in SI showed that interpreting cannot be removed from the context in which it exists, and meaning must be grasped in the context by drawing on existing knowledge, not only on words. The results revealed that the participants have an awareness of the socio-cultural and interactional factors involved in the communicative context of an interpreting situation.

Extralinguistic or background knowledge was confirmed as an important factor in interpreting, with 80 per cent of participants *always* requesting and 20 per cent *mostly* requesting information prior to an interpreting assignment. Anticipation featured directly in at least two open-ended responses to reasons for requesting briefing material.

This direct influence is validated in this study through attitudes towards what anticipation enables interpreters to do, especially to *react quickly, improve fluency, formulation and output, set the pace and feel more assured*. Indeed, extralinguistic anticipation comes through “extralinguistic knowledge of the conference situation, of the subject, of the speaker and good understanding of unfolding statements which make it possible to anticipate the ideas and information in speeches”. Interpreters viewed anticipation as a skill that helps them manage their own performance and provide high-quality interpretation.

Understanding of the subject matter being discussed at a conference was ranked the highest in importance for all participants. This confirmed that anticipation is not solely related to linguistic knowledge. Furthermore, respondents most closely associated anticipation with the words “prediction” and “context”, demonstrating an awareness of the fact that anticipation allows them to potentially predict what the next sentence constituent will be, but also that this will clearly require key contextual information.

The study showed that a high percentage of participants easily recognised the speaker’s manner and style, and the majority found it easy to identify the speaker’s stance. This implies that these are both considered to be key components of extralinguistic knowledge, and acknowledges that interpreters are part of the

communicative context of a conference. This was further supported by responses regarding the personal objectives of participants in interpreting, which related not only to message transfer or linguistic accuracy, but revealed that being present in a communicative situation is a motivator to confidently deliver an audience-centred quality service.

One participant commented that “anticipation is a great skill. Once you understand the subject matter well, anticipation will come naturally”. This study demonstrated a definite awareness of what anticipation enables interpreters to achieve, namely that using extralinguistic knowledge and learning to recognise and analyse relevant information will allow an interpreter to access “the highest possible number of anticipatory reactions”. Respondents in this study were aware of anticipation in SI, and extralinguistic knowledge was perceived as having a direct influence on anticipation. Even so, there is still scope to increase awareness and to consider how anticipation strategies could be improved and exploited best in conference interpreting settings and in interpreter training programs.

For a full copy of the research, including references, please email nicola@nhmtranslation.com