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Problem trigger classification and its applications for empirical research

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Abstract

Researchers trying to identify factors that influence the quality of simultaneous interpreting usually focus on one type of problem triggers (e.g. numbers, names, technical terms). This paper presents a different approach by analysing a group of problem triggers together. It allows not only to establish the impact of a particular problem trigger, but also to find new ones. To achieve this, a communication model has been applied for the classification of problem triggers and a study of lexical problem triggers has been conducted. It has confirmed the negative impact of well-known problem triggers and allowed to identify language-specific lexical ones.

Keywords: Simultaneous interpreting; problem triggers; classification of problem triggers; communication model of interpreting.

1. Introduction

Translation and interpreting are capturing the attention of sociolinguists, for not only linguists but also representatives of other disciplines increasingly view the process of translation as a communicative act in a specific situational context (Silis, 2007, p. 211). Similarly, Kaminskienė and Maskaliūnienė (2013) state that consciously or not we understand a text as an act of communication, as a certain phenomenon that is defined by its context. Only within the act of communication do words, phrases, collocations and idioms acquire the meaning that is understandable

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to the addressee (ibid., 2013, p. 60). Therefore an interpreted text is considered to be a new type of text – "an autonomous text within the communicative event" (Riccardi, 2002, p. 23) and should be analyzed as such.

It is important to note that interpreting differs from other forms of communication studied in linguistics in that it involves at least one participant who is neither the initiator nor the addressee of the message (Setton, 1999, p. 8). This complex communication has a number of challenges for interpreters which Daniel Gile (1995/2009) named "problem triggers". He defined problem triggers as "anything that increases the processing capacity requirements of an interpreter (more effort needs to be put into listening/understanding, short-term memory or production) or increases signal vulnerability" (ibid., 1995/2009, p. 171). Understanding these interpreting difficulties may help solve problems of communication through an interpreter.

As Gile (1995/2009) mentions, problem triggers in interpreting have not been analyzed in the past using a common conceptual framework. Moreover, they have not been analyzed in all their complexity. Only separate problem triggers have been studied, such as: physical noise (Gerver, 1971), numbers (Mazza, 2001; Liu, & Xiao, 2010), idiomatic expressions (Cattaneo, 2004), names (Meyer, 2008), accent (McAllister, 2000; Kurz, 2008; Lin et al., 2013), and rapid speeches (Gerver, 1969/2002; Gile, 1995/2009; Dailidėnaitė, & Noreikaitė, 2010). Due to the broad definition of problem triggers, it is impossible to list and research all of them at the same time. Therefore to narrow down the object of a research project, a classification of problem triggers is required which would enable the analysis of a group of problem triggers and their interaction with each other. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a simultaneous interpreting problem trigger classification based on a communication model and to show how this kind of classification could be beneficial for empirical research. The presented study is part of an on-going research project based on the interpreted texts from English into Lithuanian.

2. Theoretical background

The first communication models dealing with interpreting were based on the mathematical communication model of Shannon and Weaver (1949) (Pöchhacker, 2016, p. 84). In their model, the sender/source sends an encoded message through a channel to the receiver/receptor who decodes it. In the 1970s, this model was further developed by Ingram (1974/2015) and Kirchhoff (1976/2002). Kirchhoff's (1976/2002) model of communication is based on the same logic, i.e. the message is encoded and decoded, however, it also prominently features the sociocultural background of the source language, from which the message is sent, and the sociocultural background of the target language, in which the interpreted message is received. It is important to note that this model, as well as the very first communication model of sign language interpreting presented by Ingram, emphasized the fact that the message being sent is made up of many interconnecting codes (i.e. not only linguistic) (Ingram, 1978, p. 111). In Fig. 1, which presents an elaborated communication model for interpreting, and which combines the latter two models into one, these codes are noted as K1, K2, K3, etc.:
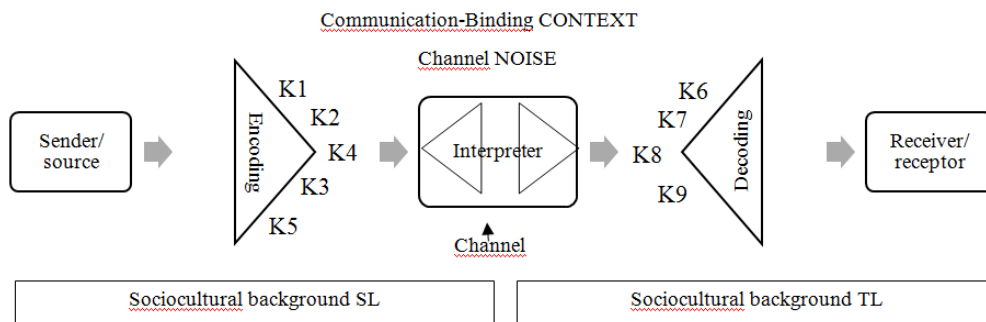

Fig. 1. Interpreting communication model based on Ingram (1974/2015: 97) and Kirchhoff (1976).

For the purposes of this paper, the role of noise in the communication model needs to be emphasized. As the message is being sent through a channel, it can be interrupted by external noise. This, in turn, could result in the

receiver getting an inaccurate message. As the creators of the first communication model put it: "if noise is introduced, then the received message contains certain distortions, certain errors, certain extraneous material that would certainly lead one to say that the received message exhibits an increased uncertainty" (Shannon, & Weaver, 1949, in Pöchhacker, 2016, p. 19). According to Ingram (1974/2015, p. 26), channel noise consists of those environmental items which directly inhibit the effectiveness of the channel (or interpreter) whether they be auditory or otherwise. This is what practicing interpreters understand as the difficulties of interpreting.

Gile (1990) presents a list of parameters whose influence on performance is attested to by professionals: the source language, the speed of delivery, style, the degree of specialization of the speech, the speaker's pronunciation, environmental noise, the temperature in the booth, the visibility of the speaker and the conference room, prior knowledge of the subject, the general mental condition and physical health of the interpreter, his experience, talent, honesty, the personal relations between team members, the number of delegates listening to the interpretation, and the attitude of organizers and delegates towards the interpreters (Gile, 1990, p. 35). This is not a finite list and its applications for research or for educational purposes would be problematic. Gile (1995/2009, p. 192–200) subsequently prepared a more structured list of problem triggers:

1. Problems arising from an increase in processing capacity requirements:
    a. High density of the source speech:
    i. high rate of delivery;
    ii. high density of the information content.
    b. External factors, such as deterioration of sound quality, strong accents, unusual linguistic style, reasoning style etc.
    c. Unknown names.
    d. Saturation when the source language and the target language are syntactically very different.
    e. Low anticipability of the source speech.

2. Signal vulnerability. Some speech segments do not necessarily require much processing capacity, but are more vulnerable than others to a momentary processing capacity shortage because of their short duration and low redundancy and because consonants, vowels and syllables may sound very much alike (numbers, names, acronyms).

3. Language-specificity related problems:
    a. Possible differences in speech perception:
    i. Differences in the perception of words;
    ii. Grammatical redundancies;
    iii. Syntactic structures;
    iv. Sociolinguistic aspects.
    b. Possible differences in speech production.
    c. Culture-specific difficulties.

4. The speaker factor.
    It has to be noted, however, that Gile's list was prepared first and foremost for educational purposes. While it can be applicable in research, it does lack broader categories to make it more comprehensive.

Setton (1999) did not directly address the issue of problem triggers, yet while writing about the influences on simultaneous interpreting, he distinguished three groups of factors: (1) the speech input ("language-in-text", including style, presentation, delivery); (2) the subject (interpreter: his/her competence, intelligence, preparedness and motivation); (3) the environment (size and character of the audience, feedback, comfort and technical conditions) (ibid., 1999, p. 99). Such a classification could be applied to problem triggers as well, but it is still too broad.

The classification of problem triggers we suggest is based on the communication model above (Fig. 1). We propose to divide problem triggers according to their source:
    a. **Sender-related problem triggers** (speaker's accent; non-native speaker; fast speech delivery; monotonous intonation; read speeches, etc.);

b. As all languages are composed of three systems (lexical, syntactic and semological) (Gleason, 1965), **problem triggers pertaining to the message** can be further divided into the following groups:
 i. Lexical (proper names; numbers; abbreviations; technical terminology);
 ii. Syntactic: phrases (idiomatic expressions; collocations; technical terminology); sentences (syntactic differences between source language and target language; lexical density; long sentences; many clauses; enumeration);
 c. Semological (metaphors; humor; sarcasm);
 d. **Problem triggers relating to an interpreter** (experience; background knowledge; communication competence; fatigue, etc.);
 e. **Technical problem triggers** (failures of interpreting equipment; external sounds; interpreter cannot see the speaker, etc.).

This kind of classification allows researchers to have a broader yet focused look at certain difficulties interpreters face in their daily work. One of the examples of how this classification can be helpful in research is presented below.

3. Methodology

In an attempt to identify problem triggers arising at the interface of languages during the process of simultaneous interpreting of a text from English into Lithuanian we have conducted an experiment with 9 beginner and 5 experienced interpreters. All interpreters are Lithuanians with English as their B language. Both groups interpreted the same speech twice in order to reduce the impact of cognitive capacity limitations and sender-related as well as technical problem triggers. For the same reason only the second interpretation was analyzed.

The goal of the experiment was to identify the problem triggers that (most likely) caused errors and omissions of important information with a specific focus not on one specific problem trigger, but on one of the trigger groups, namely, on lexical items. Even though it is rightly said that "it may be difficult to associate a particular quality deterioration phenomenon with the specific problem it originated in" (Gile, 2009, p. 172), the probability of the association is increased by looking at the aggregated pool of data from 14 interpreters which eliminates the factor of randomness and interpreter related issues (problems occurring because of a specific interpreter).

The segment chosen to be interpreted came from an Ombudsman seminar: "It's our Europe: Let's get active!", hosted by the European Parliament on 23rd April 2013. The extract is slightly longer than 8 minutes (it is difficult to tell the exact time because it contains some lengthy pauses), consists of 1,223 words uttered by three speakers: the conference moderator, the main speech presenter and the conference secretary who talks about the questions received from online participants.

The average speech delivery speed of this segment is 156 words/minute (wpm). It is usually considered that a 140 wpm speech is fast (e.g. Schlesinger, 2003), which means that the segment chosen has a fast delivery speed. It has to be noted, however, that the creator of the first computational model for simultaneous interpreting, Dillinger (1989), for example, used a deliberately faster rate (145 wpm) "in order to generate deviations" (Setton, 1999, p. 31). That is also one of the reasons why interpreting students are used as subjects for empirical research (Moser-Mercer, 1997, p. 259). As we aim to identify problem triggers inherent in a text, interpreters need to be working close to their cognitive saturation level, so that they would use automated interpreting strategies.

4. Results

Our study is still ongoing, but certain results are already clear. We have once again confirmed that interpreters experienced difficulties interpreting names (out of 5 names, 4 were omitted or erroneously interpreted by more than half of the interpreters) and numbers (out of 13 numbers, 6 were omitted or erroneously interpreted by more than half of the interpreters). More than half of the interpreters also failed to interpret such technical terms as *Tobin tax*, *urban renewal* or *crowd funding*. But what we found most interesting (and it might have been missed if the object had been a specific problem trigger) was that there were some language-specific lexical items that seem to have caused problems for the interpreters. These items fall into two categories:

- Lexical units that do not have an exact equivalent in Lithuanian (e.g. *resilience, deliberative democracy*);

- Lexical bundles that require a broader explanation when interpreted into Lithuanian (e.g. *full time* volunteers, *to innovate the European Union from the bottom-up, the European Year of Citizens could not come at a better moment, listening in on streaming, anti-Europe parties are achieving relevant results*).

It is an interesting finding because some researchers (especially those belonging to the Paris school) claim that interpreting is not language-specific (cf. Seleskovitch, 1975; Le Ny, 1978). Those who disagree with this statement have so far focused only on syntactic differences between languages as causing difficulties for interpreting (e.g. interpreting between German and French (Ilg, 1978), German and English (Wilss, 1978) or German and Italian (Riccardi, 1996)). Language-specific lexical problems are usually ignored by researchers due to the persistent claim that interpreters should interpret the meaning and the intentions of the speaker, not units of translation: words, collocations, phraseological units/idioms, and lexical bundles. Although in principle we agree with the approach that meaning can be rendered in different ways, our preliminary results show that lexical items can be problem triggers in the process of interpreting in their own right.

Conclusion

Interpreting is a communicative act, therefore this paper suggests analyzing the difficulties underlying this complex activity by grouping problem triggers according to their source in the communicative act. The study of interpreted texts from English into Lithuanian shows that this classification can be useful not only in confirming the well-known problem triggers (names, numbers, technical terms), but also in finding problem triggers that are not widely discussed, e.g. language specific items that can be further grouped into those lexical items that do not have an exact equivalent or require a broader explanation when interpreted into Lithuanian and most probably into other languages as well. As we have already mentioned, these are just the preliminary findings of the experiment and apparently more empirical research is needed. It seems evident, however, that a more comprehensive classification of problem triggers may be conducive to learning more about the difficulties of simultaneous interpreting.

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