Tapping and Mapping the Processes of Translation and Interpreting

EDITED BY

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TAPPING AND MAPPING THE PROCESSES OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING

OUTLOOKS ON EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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Tapping and Mapping the Processes of Translation and Interpreting
Outlooks on empirical research

Foreword

Challenges and Priorities in Process Research

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Most of the articles in this volume are based on papers presented at the Symposium on Translation Processes at AILA96. The theme of the AILA96 Congress, Applied Linguistics across Disciplines, is reflected in the contributions to the present volume. The volume brings together cognitive psychologists as well as interpreting scholars and translation researchers who look at process phenomena from various linguistic vantage points.

The articles in Part I deal with simultaneous interpreting (SI) and are focussed on issues of access to its processes. In Part II the focus is on methodology in general and, in particular, on how to glean information from data, while Part III is devoted to particular features of the processes of translating. The multidisciplinary nature of Translation Studies becomes manifest throughout these texts, and this, then, is the topic of Kirsten Malmkjaer's postscript to the collective volume.

One of the major issues in the empirical research of simultaneous interpreting (as in translation research) is ecological validity: there is the danger that psychological experimentation on the hypothesised sub-skills of SI in isolation yields results which do not correspond to the "sub-skill" when it is exercised in the normal context of an SI task. Thus it is important that research on interpreting is pursued not only by cognitive psychologists but also by translation scholars or, preferably, in close interaction between the two groups, as has been the case in Miriam Shlesinger's research projects. It is not only ecological validity which may be in danger; if the worst comes to the worst, the entire object of study may be lost sight of, as Malmkjaer points out in her postscript.

Access to subjects may turn out as another problem, since interpreters and translators may not always welcome a researcher into their professional territory. One way to solve this problem is to combine the roles of interpreter or translator and researcher. This is what Gun-Viol Vik-Tuovinen did, when she decided to tape-record simultaneous interpreters' interpreting performance

as well as their discussions during the short intervals when there was no need for interpreting. She was one of the two interpreters in the town-council sessions from which the data was gathered. The idea of using interpreters' mutual consultations as a potential source of information on SI processes means an enhancement to the battery of methods in SI research.

Adelina Ivanova's method of accessing SI processes is delayed retrospection, and her aim is to subject this method to critical evaluation while using it to elicit data on expert vs. novice comparisons. Annette de Groot in her article attacks a pivotal issue in Translation Studies, namely the extent to which the processes of translation and interpreting can be assumed to be alike. De Groot suspects that the sub-skills may manifest considerable differences in the instance of, say, fluency, automaticity and speed. The concern for ecological validity is always justified in research where sub-skills are investigated in isolation. Even though research on the sub-skills involved in each task may not necessarily yield ecologically valid results, however, such research will justify itself by making us more careful in our hypotheses. If the processes are different in terms of their sub-skills, there is a good reason to hypothesise that the processes are not alike. The methodologies borrowed from cognitive psychology should then be geared according to the specific profile of each task.

Critical evaluation of research methodology is in focus also in Riitta Jääskeläinen's article, in which she voices a concern for the pitfalls of empirical research to translation scholars, most of whom have not been systematically trained to do such research or to interpret its results.

Since translation and interpreting are basically linguistic operations, it should not come as a surprise that one article in this collection evaluates the power of (cognitive) linguistics in describing and explaining some elements in our interpretation of literary texts. Elżbieta Tabakowska argues that particular choices in the translation of a poem can be prioritised by virtue of their compatibility with, e.g., the "deictic grounding" that prevails in the original poem. Thus we can expect that linguistic sophistication may guide translation processes towards solutions which we intuitively prioritise.

Irena Kovačič is concerned with the very issue of whether the obvious systematicity of subtitlers' linguistic choices surfaces in their process data in any observable way. She carried out think-aloud experiments as well as retrospective interviews with subtitlers and found that although their TAPs manifested no explicit metalinguistic analysis, the subtitlers in the interviews occasionally revealed linguistic justifications for their choices. The methodological point here is that a combination of methods is more likely to yield tangible results than a single-method approach.

Expertise in translation is a key issue in translation pedagogy, and its identification is thus one of the main challenges in process research. So far most process research has focussed on the cognitive dimensions of expertise, but there is some evidence that the affective dimension also merits the attention of research scholars and education scholars alike. Janet Fraser, among others, believes in building up the translator's confidence rather than undermining it in education. Juliane House and Candace Séguinot present interesting arguments for translating in pairs: the dialogue which enfolds when a translation is being produced as a joint effort helps novices to become aware of the confines of their knowledge and professional development (House). The protocols of professional translators' dialogues in turn reveal such "managerial" issues of task performance which seldom surface in solitary think-aloud material let alone leave a trace in the finalised product (Séguinot). Another "managerial" issue is taken up by Sonja Tirkkonen-Condit, who compares the strategies with which translators manage the uncertainty which looms large throughout the translating task. If translation is seen also as a managerial operation, translation curricula should be geared towards such projects – whether simulated or real – in which co-operation, risk-taking and uncertainty management can be safely tried out and practised.

On the basis of the articles in this collection, three major challenges emerge from process research as it stands today: maintenance of a clear vision of the object of study, methodological sobriety, and transference of the emerging knowledge of expertise to translation pedagogy. Expertise probably deserves the focus of our research efforts also in the future.

Contents

Part III: Featuring the Processes

Postscript

Author Index

Subject Index

Part I

Interpreting:
How to get access to SI processes?

Interpreting as a Cognitive Process:
How can we know what really happens?

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Introduction

From the time simultaneous interpreting stopped being viewed as sheer alchemy and turned into something worth studying and dissecting, we have been trying to devise ways of finding out what actually happens in the interpreter's mind as s/he goes about performing this unusual task. While the interest in observing cognitive processes and peeking inside the "black box" is as keen in the case of interpreting as it is in the case of translation, the methods cannot always be the same. Think-aloud protocols are a case in point. Simultaneous interpreters can hardly be expected to verbalize an account of their mental processes while also producing an oral target-language output. Thus, for all intents and purposes, TAPs, in the ordinary sense, are not a viable tool for us. The closest technique we have along these lines is that of immediate retrospective accounts, analogous to the "time freezing" technique used in human factors research; the interpreter is briefly interrupted – which means that the technique can only be used in an experimental setting – and is asked questions about her/his reasoning just before the freeze. There is good reason to suspect, however, that the very act of interrupting the process will alter it.

More prevalent in ongoing research have been studies which make recourse to Information Processing flow models, extrapolated from cognitive psychology, in an effort to observe the workings of task-specific capacity-sharing; and to computational modelling, in an effort to design, implement and evaluate systems which instantiate theoretical approaches to human cognition, and track the depletion of the cognitive resources. This approach is particularly useful in addressing the very aspects of processing that SI research has largely passed over: low-level, rehearsed, automatic behaviors that interact in complex

ways in the process of simultaneous interpreting. As Lonsdale (1997: 103) points out:

> [...] if modeling of the process is possible at some level of description, the computational system will be able to provide data about resource consumption, search and deliberation methods, task and control decisions and other performance-related items that would otherwise be inaccessible on a first-hand basis.

In a sense, we might say that the computational modelling and cognitive approaches are everything that the early introspective methods were not. The latter were largely based on observations and insights which the researcher (almost invariably also a practicing interpreter) had arrived at in a global, holistic and largely intuitive way – a very auspicious beginning, but one that was bound to grind to a halt unless combined with more scientific methods. The current trend is towards using preliminary intuitions and abstractions as a point of departure for the formulation and empirical testing of hypotheses, in the hope of fine-tuning our understanding of both the universal and the unique features of the task. It is a trend that has developed over the past thirty years or so, though its beginnings were rather halting and sporadic. By now, it seems safe to say that the SI research community at large has indeed graduated to more rigorous methodologies and to greater interdisciplinarity. (The very fact that one can finally speak of a "research community" in SI is testimony to tangible progress). The challenge now lies in finding the optimal balance between the intuitive and the scientific, the controllable and the ecologically valid, the definitive and the viable, the task-specific and the psychologically universal. In what follows, I will try to describe some of the methodological bugbears which empirical studies of SI must take into account in the quest to find out more about *how* the interpreting process really works.

Is the Process Decomposable?

In a recent issue of *Interpreting*, Frauenfelder and Schriefers (1997: 75) argue for a decomposition of the interpreting task:

> [...] it makes sense to us to start by investigating the clearly isolatable and testable aspects of SI. When some basic findings are firmly established in isolation, we can proceed to more complex situations in which the same aspects of behavior are embedded in more realistic contexts [...] Although this approach can be criticized as not being very

> ecologically valid, we would like to maintain that as such it might prove
> to be extremely fruitful.

In other words: the authors maintain that before adopting a more holistic view, it would seem best, at least for the time being, to investigate the components – the sub-subprocesses – one by one, and only then to test the interactions among them. All of which implies that SI is indeed decomposable into recognizable subskills, and that studying these in isolation will lead to an ever-fuller understanding of the process as a whole. But will it? To study the cognitive processes of simultaneous interpreting in isolation would appear to be, in a sense, a contradiction in terms. Say we want to gain a better understanding of the time-course of activating semantic information in order to observe the subtleties of anticipation. Psychologists have shown us (e.g. Moss et al. 1997), through cross-modal priming experiments, that mental representations of meanings begin to be activated before the point at which a single word can be uniquely identified on the basis of the sensory input alone. Thus, the alternative meanings that are available before recognition can be evaluated against the constraints and predictions of the prior context, allowing words with congruent meanings to be recognized more rapidly than those with incongruent ones. There is clear evidence of contextual facilitation – i.e. of top-down interaction – before actual recognition of the word.

But there's the rub. Studying contextual facilitation in isolation does not necessarily tell us how it works when combined with the many other components of the process. De Groot, a cognitive psychologist, who decided to analyze the task – a rare event in itself, since cognitive psychologists have been very reluctant to do so – starts with word-translation studies, in which subjects are presented (visually) with a word and are asked to come up with a translation of that word as quickly as possible, but without sacrificing accuracy. In a study involving thirteen independent variables and three main dependent ones, she observes the role of each of these, including, for example, the prevalence of the concreteness effect – i.e. that concrete nouns are processed more rapidly than abstract ones. Yet, she concedes that "context can modify the effect of concreteness on word translation. The roles of other word characteristics in word translation may also respond to the manipulation of context [...]" (1997: 42-43).

Actually, questions relating to the ecological validity of decomposing the interpreting task are not unlike those raised in connection with studies of natural language in general, on the one hand, and of the broader psychological framework, on the other. In the former, it is considered exceedingly difficult to conduct scientific work in situations that permit the free use of natural language codes. In the latter, one finds concern over "decoupling" one

particular system (e.g. memory) from the larger system of cognitive processes and problem-solving strategies. In interpreting research too the decoupling of experimental procedures from authentic conference settings and the dissection of the task into mini-components have been cited as undermining ecological validity (for a review of this issue, see Gile 1998). SI clearly involves meaningful, contextualized materials, and any attempt to "tamper" with these is regarded by some as defeating the very purpose of research. In fact, strictly speaking, the processing of discourse in SI is apt to be affected not only by the immediately preceding units of text but by the text-in-situation, the setting, the circumstances, and the interpreter's knowledge of the situation as a whole, which s/he applies as an integrated ensemble of strategic bottom-up/top-down processes. Thus, decomposition of the task is problematic, notwithstanding the importance of conducting a controlled examination of each of the large number of variables involved.

Distinguishing Cognitive Processes per se from Norm-Driven Strategies

Early attempts to examine ways in which the concept of norms might be relevant to the study and practice of interpreting (Shlesinger 1989; Harris 1990) were based on the assumption that oral translation, like its written counterpart, will manifest certain task-specific regularities of behavior that could reasonably be seen as norm-governed. It was also assumed that the norms which come to bear on interpreting are internalized, to varying degrees, both by practitioners and by those who use their services, to the point where any serious deviation will entail sanctions of some sort.

When it comes to conference interpreting, the prevailing norm emphasizes fluency, and the primacy of meaning over form. Its best known explicit formulation is Seleskovitch's (1968) notion of *deverbalization* – presented both as the most effective strategy and, in effect, as a normative requirement. Either way, it tallies well with the limitations of processing capacity; as MacWhinney (1997) points out, the likeliest form of storage in simultaneous interpreting is conceptual representation established through a process of structure building, if only because nonconceptual processing would place heavy demands on raw verbal memory. Thus, it is only natural that interpreters will be deverbalizing most of the time (though it is conceded that *transcodage* (direct structural correspondence) may prevail when the cognitive load is exceptionally high, especially among novices.)

Fluency and smoothness of delivery are stressed in the literature for instructors and trainers of interpreters as well, along with the message that not all elements of the source text need necessarily be reproduced as such. Whether it is seen as mere rationalization or as a blessing in disguise, the merits of compression are a recurrent theme in the simultaneous interpreting literature. Also implicit in the deverbalization theory is the assumption that interpreters engage in macroprocessing; i.e. that they have acquired the ability to sift through surface forms in a way that will allow for the construction of conceptual frames and propositions, and attending selectively to semantic content. I.e. it is assumed that they have evolved and internalized a strategy driven by a set of norms, and that neither they nor an outside observer can tell which task-specific processes are a function of practice and skill, per se, and which are a function of what they perceive as "good" performance. Such strategies need not necessarily be conscious – at least not all the time. They are probably, as Lörscher (1991: 78) puts it (from the psycholinguistic perspective of second-language learning): "a potentially conscious procedure for the solution of a problem which an individual is faced with when translating a text segment from one language into another" (cf. Kalina 1992). Or perhaps, as Ericsson and Simon (1984) point out, again in the case of learning strategies, they may well have become proceduralized to the point of operating automatically through connections in long-term memory, such that they are not accessible to introspection. The notion of a norm-based choice of strategies has been discussed in the Translation Studies literature (e.g., Chesterman 1993, 1998), along with the observation that a strategy which is used regularly by competent professionals tends to acquire normative force.

It is the pervasiveness of these automatized strategies that encumbers our efforts at isolating and studying the purely cognitive components of the process. Yet, despite its pervasiveness, the problem was hardly mentioned in the relevant literature until it was raised by Schjoldager (1995), and it has yet to be referred to by more than a handful of interpreting scholars. Thus, for example, Frauenfelder and Schriefers (1997: 75) express their concern that failure to distinguish between basic cognitive processes and acquired strategies "would put the researcher in a bad position, since any claims about the cognitive processes underlying SI-performance would only be valid for a given set of interpreting strategies depending upon the training received or perhaps even upon the individual subject", and speak of the need to isolate the "basic configuration of the linguistic/cognitive system for SI".

How then can we ever study the purely psychological, cognitive workings of our performance? How can we tell where the limits of human processing capacity end, and the conscious or unconscious application of a