

ERROR ANALYSIS IN THE FORMAL TRAINING FOR SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING

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Abstract

Training interpreters is conventionally understood as predominantly ensuring that they have a sufficient amount of practice in specially equipped laboratories and some theoretical knowledge from the field of translation studies. However, despite the established existence of quality standards for interpreters and their work, very little can be standardized in what concerns their training due to the numerous levels of difference between the languages in which interpreters operate. This paper aims to explore the errors occurring in the basic training of third-year students in simultaneous interpreting by using a selected sample of recorded and scripted speeches delivered in class in the original (Source Language) and Target Language versions. The study focuses on the interpreting issues occurring between English and Romanian and explores the factors these issues originate from.

Keywords: *simultaneous interpreting (SI), training, error analysis, interlanguage, discourse.*

1. Introductory considerations

It is a teacher's job to assess numerous aspects of their students' learning experience in order to make informed decisions as to the adequacy of the content and scope of a course. Training interpreters is no exception to this although these students have been and will always be a special case in the history of language teaching. Today it is generally agreed that using a language well (native or foreign, regardless) does not necessarily mean that someone is a good interpreter. Moreover, being a good interpreter is not a finite state despite the formality of recognition of a certain level of qualification at a given time. It depends on 1) the interpreter's ability to operate between their L1 and L2 (and L3 if the case), and 2) the interpreter's experience not only in updating the actual languages they operate in, but also in updating their knowledge of the

field/topic/domain they operate in. As Alexandra-Lavinia Istratie-Macarov shows in her paper *Legal issues encountered by translators and interpreters in Romania, in their activity*, this level of qualification entails even understanding the legal context in which interpreters function (Istratie-Macarov, 2019:127). So there are multiple factors at play in the training of interpreters today.

The formal instruction the students receive at BA level has a limited scope at basic level and it is only meant to form certain habits and operations such as active listening, public speaking, discourse analysis, speech writing, glossary writing, targeted research and, obviously, practice in simultaneous interpreting. The need to assess errors that occur in class stems from an important principle in teaching – that assessment must be transparent and fair, and that the students’ self-assessment is in fact an important component of formative assessment throughout the academic year. The base-line hypothesis is that some errors are predictable and that they inform a pattern for the incremental growth in the complexity of the interpreters’ performance. Researching errors in interpreter training is a rather delicate process and somewhat different from the same process in exact sciences because of the nature of translation in general, and interpreting in particular. Rendering a negotiated meaning between what is translatable and what is not implies that some errors are binary by default whereas others are non-binary. The difference, as Basil Hatim shows in his book *Teaching and Researching Translation*, is that in the former case there are two possible answers one of which is definitely wrong, while in the latter there are more than two possible answers out of which more than one is correct (Hatim, 2013:180). If we can identify at least the most frequent errors and explain their causes, we can outline not just immediate remedial work, but also foresee the content that a future support system could cover to assist trainees for certain languages, especially with reference to the influence that (at least) two languages can have on each other from an interpreter’s point of view.

2. Study Data

The sample collection stretched over two consecutive academic years and included a total of 65 students in their senior year (third year of BA programme) who took the practical course of Simultaneous Interpreting as part of their training in view of becoming professional translators and interpreters with Romanian as their L1 and English as their L2. The course description explicitly indicates that the expected standard of performance at the end of two semesters is an uninterrupted twenty-minute stream of simultaneous interpreting with good levels of linguistic accuracy and appropriateness, no distortion, no omission, good control of style and register, good knowledge of the topic/domain, high ability of synthesis, good control of L1, and appropriate booth conduct. The content of the course was the same in both academic years. It is defined around a

number of topics that feature frequently in conferences where the degree of language specialization is moderate: education, environment issues, travel and lifestyle, health and wellbeing, human rights, employment, politics, social and cultural events, animal world, public administration. There is a general consensus as to the frequency of topics present on the interpreting market, as Krisztina Szabari suggests in her paper *Interpreting into the B Language* (Szabari, 2002:12). Apart from large established international organizations that are constant users of interpreting services, the topics of concern addressed in their conferences trickle down in smaller events as project activities that fulfill similar aims to those of the mother programme. It goes without saying then that such topics will find a place in any teaching/training programme for interpreters.

The course does not have the conventional lecture-seminar format but is considered (taught and assessed) as a practical course with a total of 28 weeks of instruction (56 hours, two hours weekly). The activities thereof include conventional interpreting, exercises of rephrasing in both L1 and L2, anticipation and prediction, summary, discourse analysis, speech writing, speech delivery with and without visual aids, research on a given topic, intonation, and whispering. Occasionally, relay was attempted considering that, due to institutional constraints, the groups included students who had combinations of three languages out of which L1 (Romanian) was never a language of study. The students' L2 and L3 were a combination of English (major or minor in the BA programme) plus either German or French. Depending on their degree of control of L3 on a given topic, relay was only attempted for a very limited time (short activities no longer than five minutes) to give the students an experience in what is informally called „second-hand interpreting”, only within comfortable limits. Here, „comfortable limits” suggests that the students' performance is always viewed against a theoretical model of effort that defines three stages in interpreting (roughly put, they are reception in the source language, analysis/decoding and reformulation in the target language) (Giles, 2005:44). If the students cannot process listening and reformulation in simultaneous mode (a maximum of 3 seconds' delay) and resort instead to consecutive interpreting, then the level of language and knowledge are considered to be outside the comfort zone.

For the purposes of this paper, the analysis only refers to the students' level of English and not of their L1 (Romanian) or the other language. Given the fact that the groups included students with English as their major or their minor language in their BA programme, the present analysis is interesting because the difference between languages L2 and L3 does not correspond to the difference between the languages considered as major or minor in the students' BA programme. Where German and French were major languages, the students' level of English (minor) was higher than that of their major, and so in fact English qualifies as their L2 after Romanian.

The students were allowed to use their mobile phones as recording devices. They were asked to do two things during the class apart from their usual routine, namely to exchange speeches in either written or spoken form (as a text or as an audio recording), and also to pair them up with their own rendition in the target language (always audio recorded). This request enables the students to compare their translation with the original outside the classroom and assess themselves against the standard of performance (which is announced at the beginning of the semester) early enough to decide what kind of remedial training they need before the end-of-term assessment. On the other hand, this opportunity to assess one's own interpreting out-of-class has the indirect benefit of reducing the amount of direct correction during the class, and this in fact encouraged the students to contribute the audio recording to the present research for further scripting and analysis in conditions of absolute protection of personal data and documents and anonymity of participation.

The corpus was constructed based on the audio recording of the class speeches delivered in the target language (transcribed) and paired with the original speech (its written version if it was identical to the spoken delivery, or recorded and then scripted if no written version exists). Since the analysis focuses on errors between Romanian (L1) and English (L2), the method of studying the corpus is strictly limited to the study of occasional omissions and to comparing a word, phrase, or sentence against their correspondent found in the same place in the speech in the target language. The 65 students were asked to submit the pair consisting of a source language text and its correspondent interpretation. They submitted a total of 200 such items on the various topics proposed in the course, 100 of them from English to Romanian and 100 from Romanian to English. The level of English of the student sample varies between B2 and C1, and the proposed topics of the course cover general English plus a selection of moderately specialized language comprising lexical items of moderate frequency.

3. Errors

The standard of performance of the course places a significant emphasis on the qualities of the end-product. Thus, from the point of view of the standard of performance used in formal assessment, omissions are considered a type of error, but from the point of view of the correspondence between the source-language and the target-language texts, the absence of an item in the target-language text represents a case where that item does not qualify for comparison and analysis. Thus, separate reference will be made to the occurrence of omissions as one of the frequent issues in the discourse of the sampled interpreter-trainees, but it is important to explain that the bulk of the errors

considered in the present paper will imply the actual presence of an item in both the source-language (SL) and the target-language (TL) texts.

The errors can be placed in the following categories:

Lexis. The most frequent pertains to derivation in both directions (English to Romanian and Romanian to English) and it appears virtually in all the speeches. Derivation in general and the use of certain prefixes and suffixes in particular represent a point of difficulty: in English, *un-/under* (unemployment, underemployment, *-ic/-ical* (economic, economical, historic, historical), in Romanian *sub-/ne-/dez-* (subangajare, neangajare, dezangajare). The next most frequent error (183 out of 200) refers to confusion between partial synonyms and cognates in Romanian and English: *pottery/ceramics* (Rom. ceramică), *probation/internship* (Rom. ‘probă’/‘stagiu’), *term/period* (Rom. ‘termen’/‘perioadă’), *waste/garbage* (‘deșeur’/‘gunoi’), *realize/become aware* (Rom. ‘a realiza’/‘a conștientiza’), *pass/overcome* [...*the difficulties*] (Rom. ‘a trece’/‘a depăși’), *check/verify* [...*your text twice*] (Rom. ‘a verifica’), *implication/commitment* (Rom. ‘implicare’/‘angajare’) etc.

Pronunciation. The most frequent mistake (93 TL speeches out of the 100 in English) refers to word and sentence stress. Wrong word stress often comes together with wrong individual sounds: *fragile* */frə'dʒaɪl/, *knowledge* */knəʊlɪdʒ/, *companies* */kəm'pənɪz/, *developed* */devə'lɒpt/, *cultural* */kʌl'tʃərəl/, *also* */'ɔ:lso/, *extracurricular* */ek'strə'kʊrɪkjʊlə/, *personally* */pə'sɒnəli/, *difficulty* */dɪ'fɪçəlti/, *hotel* */'həʊtel/, *police* */'pəʊlɪs/, *ballet* */'bʌlət/ etc. Another aspect is the lack of connected speech and, as a consequence, wrong sentence stress (in all 100 speeches in English).

Morphology. This is an area of frequent errors. There is no speech without some morphological accident, and all of them occur in the English TL speeches. Lack of plural nouns e.g., **modern language*, **several question* etc. occurs in places that are also plagued by omissions. Very many errors affect verb construction. The most frequent is the wrong tense choice between present and past, wrong agreement (**a student don't want to work*), and wrong voice (**humour cannot understand*). This area of errors encompasses the entire sample of speeches. As to noun constructions, frequent errors are wrong use of nouns in terms of agreement (**information are*, **the team work*), the use of the article (**wages was*), wrong use of the Genitive (**the expectations of the employers*), wrong word class (**a perfectionist person*). Then, there are errors concerning other word classes: confusion between adjectives and adverbs (*good* instead of *well*), confusion between adjectives and past participle verbs: **a young graduated teenager*, wrong conjuncts (*in comparison* instead of *by contrast*), wrong use of connectors (*also* instead of *both... and*, *as long as* instead of *when*), wrong use of prepositions (**the most important step on writing this paper*, confusion between *in the same time* and *at the same time*), wrong use of deictic particles (confusion between *this*, *these*, *that*, *those*, and *one*) etc. These errors are present

in 96 out of 100 TL English speeches and affect structures that are considered very frequent and taught at a low level (A2).

Syntax. The errors are found at all levels: constituents, simple sentence, and complex sentence. For the first category, the most frequent by far (86 out of 100 speeches) is the omission of the subject pronoun or the existential *there*. Again, errors may appear in the organization of verb phrases. Thus, the verbs answer and explain are often used with the wrong object: **answer to a question*, **explain me something*; other verbs are used in the wrong voice and the wrong argumentation as a consequence e.g., **questions that interest you*. Another frequent confusion is made between direct and indirect questions (i.e., subject-verb inversion). Finally, the students seem to have difficulty building subordinate clauses; they form misshaped relative clauses and, in general, the complementation around the noun, e.g., **you will find a job good for you*, and tend to find subordinate adverbial clauses particularly challenging (especially clauses of time, condition, concession, and comparison).

A distinct category of errors in interpreting is **discourse analysis**. This is part of the second stage of the process and, at least for beginner interpreters, it represents an important cause of delay. The most frequent errors in this second stage of interpreting are misinterpretation of the speaker's intention, whether due to the wrong interpretation of modal verbs or to other causes (*Should this be a coincidence?* - wrongly understood with *should* as a way to express advice instead of presupposition), adopting the inappropriate level of formality (**I consider myself a pretty perfectionist person* instead of [...] *quite a perfectionist*), and redundancy. The latter is very frequent at the beginning of the course and less frequent toward the end of the second semester, and it can occur by explicitly repeating a word/phrase or by means of context (*'it is very bad if you don't know about that company or details about that company'*, *'because I'm not an only child... in my family'*, *'it's very important to have experience in this domain because this is what employers want, so it's important'*).

Reformulation. This is the third stage of simultaneous interpreting. Leaving omissions apart for the time being, **distortions** represent the most important error in interpreting, and the present sample displays them abundantly e.g., *'standard language such as English or French'* instead of *lingua franca*, *'collocations from the scandal press articles in Britain after Brexit'* instead of *'Brexit-related collocations in British tabloids'*, *'because you worked a lot'* for the original Rom. *'doar n-ați lucrat degeaba'*. Other less frequent situations of distortions are: poor lexical choice: Rom. *'aparate de zbor'* translated as *this machine/flying objects*, *academic area* instead of *academic environment*, wrong rendition of numbers (about years, distance, statistics), plain nonsense such as *'when you go to an interview you will be well prepared if you agree with me'* instead of *'...if you take the above-mentioned advice'*, and calque as in **Transylvania occupies the first place*, **force work*, **Union European*, **in this*

*discussion I would like to expose to you an image..., *you have to have patience, *my parents made big efforts to keep me in schools.*

4. Interpretation of Data – Causes of Errors

a) Omissions appear throughout the sample, without exception.

The frequency of this particular type of error has a number of causes that are natural given the students' lack of experience. All the students in the sample struggle to reduce the delay from the source language speech to the target language one. The explanation lies in the stages of the process of simultaneous interpreting. The interpreter performs three different activities in a strict sequence: aural reception of the SL text, decoding and discourse analysis, and oral delivery/reformulation of the TL text. The shorter it takes the interpreter to decode the message, the more successful the TL rendition will be. There are, of course, factors that, unfortunately, may influence the reformulation of the TL text despite successfully completing the decoding stage: the interpreter's diction, unexpected mishaps (sneeze etc.), the interpreting equipment and booth, the interpreter's multitasking (being interrupted, having to consult some resources etc.), or even the abrupt turn of the SL speech if, by contrast, the SL is interrupted or amended.

All the latter apart, however, fast and correct decoding prevails in the success of simultaneous interpreting, and this is the source of most omissions in our sample. It is important to emphasize that not all omissions are the same and they are not caused by the students' poor level of English or Romanian because they can demonstrate sufficient knowledge of L1 and L2 for the same speech content in a different setting. When asked to listen to a speech and then summarize it, the students manage to cover all the main ideas and give a sufficient amount of detail to prove that they have grasped the message and the speaker's intentions, and they can do it both in English and in Romanian. But when they are supposed to do simultaneous interpreting for the same speech, omissions occur frequently because of two factors: sound issues and strictly decoding issues. The former cause is a typical beginner error: the interpreter focuses more on their own voice rather than the speaker's voice and consequently loses parts of the SL text at regular intervals, which results in truncated TL delivery ('*a space where...err....work...*'). The proportion of such cases in the sample (27 out of 200) is not significant, however, because these situations occur at the beginning of the course (in the first two weeks) and represent a transitory, if inevitable, stage (Jones, 2002:68). Once the students are able to handle listening and speaking at the same time, this type of omission subsides gradually towards the middle of the semester.

But the second type of omission, caused by poor decoding, prevails throughout the entire course, even despite good listening skills. Two difficulties

riddle this second stage of simultaneous interpreting: finding the appropriate equivalent of a word/phrase in the TL – especially in the case of cognates, borrowings or professional jargon – and establishing the relevance of a particular word/phrase for the audience in the effort to summarize the SL message or give its synthetic version. The latter also includes a cultural component because there are differences between national organizations that interpreters have to take into consideration for the sake of their TL audience, and there are also differences in attitude, values and perception between the SL and TL users which challenge the interpreter’s sociolinguistic flexibility, and virtually the entire sample in our study displays this situation: *‘thank you for your attention’* instead of *‘thank you for your attention and the best of luck’*.

b) The other errors apart from omissions:

Lexis. The causes of the errors in this area are interlanguage, interference with another language, and lack of background and topic-related knowledge. These three causes are in fact related in the sense that greater lexical control comes with a higher level of English. Since most of the students are within the B range (with 7 students out of 65 displaying C1 English and C2 Romanian), the errors of lexis are inevitable and hard to correct without raising the actual level of language. As to the background knowledge and knowledge of the topic, the course does require students to do research and prepare their speeches, but it is a fact that a significant amount of the specialized lexis is only temporarily stored in the active memory, and for an inexperienced interpreter this is actually a common difficulty.

Pronunciation. Some of these errors occur as a reflection of the students’ interlanguage. In other words, the less frequent the word, the more likely it is to improvise pronunciation. Another reason is that cognates are relatively frequent words in the students’ L1 (Romanian), so there is a high tendency to transfer patterns of (especially) Latin-rooted words between English and Romanian. A third cause pertains to the process of interpreting i.e., delays in reception and decoding. The interpreter follows the speaker’s intonation trail and stress pattern and superposes them to a delayed word or phrase, thus altering the stress of a TL phrase or sentence, which would not happen in a language exercise apart from interpreting. Finally, for certain words, students display a certain degree of interference from a language other than Romanian or English. Some students come from areas where the population is bilingual (Romanian and Russian) and they tend to transfer patterns of Russian in the way they speak Romanian. Also, the students have a third language of study at school (L3, German or French) and they also tend to transfer patterns of pronunciation from L3 to English (see *also* */ˈlʌzə/ above, from German, and *developed* */ˈdevəloʊpt/ from French).

Morphology. These errors are not related to interlanguage, but pertain to the third stage of interpreting (reformulation in the TL). When asked to produce the same words/phrases in the context of an English language exercise the students

have no difficulty in using the respective structure accurately and they can also justify the use of the structure in a given context. But during simultaneous interpretation they tend to apply the rules of morphology by proximity (e.g., *One of the major *problem* is lack of resources) because they struggle to (shorten and) connect the idea in the Subject noun phrase to that expressed by the Subject complement noun phrase (which in this example has a singular noun as Head). In what regards word classes, the cause of most errors is interlanguage. There are significant differences between Romanian and English in the morphology of verb structure (tense, voice and aspect), and agreement is easily transferred to English pending on the Romanian schemata of certain concepts that are reflected by a countable noun in plural (*banii, informațiile*) as opposed to the English equivalent expressed by uncountable nouns (*money, information*). The same can account for deictics and the use of articles. As to prepositions, there are differences between English and Romanian in the preposition regime of nouns, adjectives and verbs, and the occurrence of such errors is therefore explained by interlanguage.

Syntax. The absence of the subject pronoun in the TL English speeches is due to language interference: in Romanian it is possible to convey an accurate and precise message via a subjectless sentence, and students are tempted to transfer this pattern when they interpret into English especially when, in a longer sentence, they have previously transmitted a Subject noun phrase that is not a proform (proper names, common nouns, substantivised forms). Language interference accounts for the way verb complementation occurs in TL English speeches because of the different way prepositions participate in the construction of objects in Romanian and English. As to subordination, the difference in tense and aspect between the two languages also influences the way subordinate clauses are built, and a particular difficulty is the hesitation between an *-ing* form and an infinitive to render a Romanian noun derived from a verb accompanied by a complement (*coding* vs *to code* + Direct Object for the Romanian *codarea* + a noun in Genitive).

Discourse analysis. The interpreters' level of experience can be measured in their ability to synthesize information, adopt the required register and style, convey the speaker's intentions, and decide the degree of relevance of a given piece of information for the audience in order to avoid redundancy. However, students are bound to make many errors in this area due, first of all, to insufficient knowledge of L2. This appears in their frequent inability to read beyond the morphological and syntactic levels of a sentence. For example, an interrogative sentence may in fact represent an invitation or an order, not a question (e.g., *Why don't you come later?*). As to formality, the convention is to abide by the interaction conventions of the TL. If, for example, native speakers of Romanian use a certain pronoun/subject-verb agreement to show politeness (*dumneavoastră sunteți* – pl. 'you are'), then interpreting into Romanian must

observe this convention. Because students interact with their peers during the practical course, they tend to forsake such conventions and address everyone with pronouns and verbs in singular. The same goes for using the appropriate form of address regardless of the direction in which simultaneous interpretation takes place. Finally, the high rate of redundancy in the students' performance is a residue from both consecutive interpreting (which they take the previous year) and written translation and scripting. Their perception is that a good end-product must not omit anything the speaker says, especially since they understand that omission, on the other hand, is a type of error in its own right. Also, students seem to take a long time to decide how much of what the speaker says is actually relevant for the TL audience and how much can be left out because it has already been said, or they genuinely forget what has already been said, which is a problem of focus rather than decoding.

Distorsions. The causes of distorsions do not lie in reception. In other types of practice (active listening) students demonstrate that they have good listening subskills (they can give exact words, they understand the context, they have a good grasp of the speaker's emotion and intention etc.); it remains therefore that the issue stems from decoding and the causes are insufficient knowledge of the topic or of the TL jargon. Another cause is poor interpretation of the discourse function, especially when a speech displays a combination of functions the decoding of which depends on a good reading of the connecting elements and deictics. The occurrence of calque is typically explained by L1 interference but, just like in the case of pronunciation, there is a certain amount of L3 interference (German, French, Russian) in this group which is confirmed by occasional relay practice when students pick up the same phrase of identical syntactic organization and close lexical equivalence.

5. Remedial Work

Some errors can be anticipated in the context of the course and its prerequisites. Since interpreters need to be able to perform a series of specific operations (summary, rephrasing, paraphrasing, transcoding, etc.) in both SL and TL, certain errors can be addressed by simply providing more of the same kind of practice for a longer time. However, good listening and speaking are essential, which means that particular importance should be given to listening practice in various formats (listening with pauses, various listening tasks to consolidate certain subskills such as listening for detail, for gist, for inference, for comparison etc.), as well as speaking practice (speech, story-telling, reporting, describing, debating, talk-show format, presentation with visual aids etc.).

Apart from just basic communication skills, a series of activities should focus on language (both L1 and L2) such as grammar, pronunciation, lexis, syntax etc., and especially on applying grammar rules in communication. Special

activities reinforce what students gradually understand as interpreting operations: anticipation, reconstruction, rephrasing, summarizing, style and register change. In her paper on using the Communicative Approach in the training of international students with Romanian as their L2, Ludmila Braniște emphasize the importance of the communicative nature of the class activities and also insists in the teacher playing an active role (as participant) in speaking activities (Braniște, 2013:423). Beyond just language practice, students need to build a solid experience in doing research and preparing for an interpreting session: reading, watching the news, getting themselves familiarised with a certain topic/domain, writing their own glossary, writing and rehearsing their own speeches, analyzing other people's speeches, engaging in role play and mock-debate activities, and recording their own performance in order to assess the faithfulness of their rendition and the quality of their delivery in the target language.

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