

GENDER ISSUES DURING SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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Abstract

While there are a number of general operating standards in Simultaneous Interpreting (SI) that are known and accepted by most interpreters, no guidelines exist regarding the gender of the interpreter. The aim of this study, which includes an experiment, a questionnaire filled in by the interpreters and a survey answered by a highly representative audience, is to determine how and to what extent the interpreters' gender may influence a group of interpreters within the context of violence against women. In addition to gender, empathy is the second key theoretical concept used in this study. The results of this research suggest that, although there appear to be no fundamental differences in terms of the amount of information conveyed by a group of male interpreters as opposed to a group of female interpreters, and that empathy does not seem to play a fundamental role, there are some distinctive discursive factors particular to the speech of female and male interpreters which can readily be distinguished by an audience. Therefore, when working in such situations, exclusively using the services of female interpreters may be more appropriate.

Keywords: interpretation, research, experiment, empathy, survey, questionnaire and violence.

Resumen

A pesar de que existan una serie de reglas de funcionamiento general en IS conocidas y aceptadas por la mayoría de los intérpretes, no existe ninguna norma sobre el género de los intérpretes. En este trabajo de investigación (TI) que incluye un estudio experimental, un cuestionario a los intérpretes y una encuesta a un público anónimo altamente potencial, vamos a intentar averiguar de qué manera y hasta qué punto el género

del intérprete influye en IS en temas de violencia contra la mujer. Los resultados de los diferentes análisis parecen indicar que, aunque en un principio no existe una gran diferencia entre la cantidad de información transmitida por un grupo de intérpretes masculino y otro femenino y la empatía no desempeña un papel fundamental, hay algunos elementos diferenciales en materia discursiva entre la interpretación de un hombre y una mujer perceptibles por el público. Por lo tanto, parece conveniente que los intérpretes en materia de violencia contra la mujer sean de género femenino.

Palabras clave: interpretación, investigación, experimento, empatía, encuesta, cuestionario y violencia.

Introduction

There are a number of factors governing interpreting which render it a complex activity requiring both a high level of concentration and much practice to achieve optimal quality; “quality is the sum of several different, heterogeneous aspects, some of which involve different subjects – interpreters, clients, users, speakers – each with a different view and perception of quality” (Garzone 2002:108). Many researchers have attempted to define the different standards necessary to achieve a high level of quality during interpreting. Although various authors have put forwards a range of different proposals to establish specific quality parameters for professional performance, they tend to converge to a large extent.

Quality in Simultaneous Interpreting

Kalina (2002) proposes a number of factors which may affect quality during SI. She classifies these factors into semantic content (coherence, logic, clarity, lack or absence of ambiguity, reliability, etc.); linguistic content (grammar checking, style, terminology and correct register, etc.), and; presentation (voice, tone, coordination, discipline, simultaneity, behaviour and conduct in public, among others).

According to Gile (2009), the parameters of high-quality interpreting are: conceptual clarity, linguistic acceptability, conciseness and terminological adaptation, fidelity and professional performance.

Alonso Bacigalupe (2009) argues that the three pillars of quality during interpreting are the correct transmission of content, appropriate use of language and a high standard of production.

In addition, Garzone (2002) believes that a number of guidelines need to be established in order to guarantee ‘quality’ in interpreting. She demonstrates that there is a wide variety of standards for different cultures, in different geographical areas and affecting diverse temporal frameworks. Furthermore, Garzone also indicates that quality in interpreting is also an ethical problem.

Therefore, given that simultaneous interpreting (SI) is a complex task with a general consensus regarding quality in interpreting, it would be appropriate to provide a generally applicable set of guideline to enable interpreters to improve their professional practice, regardless of the particular context where their service is provided.

Norms in Simultaneous Interpreting

However, the fact remains that there are no general rules governing how SI should be generally performed, but instead a number of conventions and basic norms for behaviour and professional performance accepted by a large range of interpreters and advocated by a number of authors. For instance, the first interpreters’ manual, *The interpreter’s handbook: How to become a conference interpreter* (Herbert 1952) includes a series of basic guidelines concerning the interpreter’s behaviour, dress and voice. Also, in one of his articles, Harris (1990) also suggests that rules for interpreters may change depending on the country or the geographic area. Moreover, interpreters’ associations, such as the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) have worked towards setting up “SI professional standards” concerning the number of interpreters per booth, the number of booths per assignment (depending on the number of working languages during the meeting in question, working conditions, salary, etc.)

However, although there are a number of generally accepted operating standards in SI, there are no rules regarding the interpreter’s gender. In fact, for the purposes of this research, no regulation or norm has been found stipulating that a man should be interpreted by a man and a woman by a woman in SI.

Therefore, it would appear that this issue has not yet been sufficiently explored and might have a certain bearing on the perception that an audience has in terms of naturalness and the coherence of the audio-visual cues being particularly interesting to ascertain whether the interpreter's gender is a major focus when highly emotional content is being interpreted. As a case in point, violence against women, defined as a form of abuse ranging from discrimination to physical, sexual or psychological aggression: “a result of the discrimination experienced both in law and in practice, and the persistence of gender inequalities” (ONU 2013) is a highly sensitive topic which may trigger feelings of closeness between female speakers and their female interpreters, which in turn may help improve the general interpreting performance and therefore enhance the efficiency of the interpretation service.

Empathy in Interpreting

There are numerous gender studies which focus on empathy. Freshbach and Roe (1968) found that girls aged six and seven years old react verbally and with more empathy to a series of slides about girls in happy, sad or frightening situations than boys, indicating that humans tend to empathise more with people of their own sex. This idea was confirmed by Hoffman (2002) for whom, in cases of abuse, the degree of empathy for the victim and the empathetic anger towards the perpetrator both influence the punishment.

According to Pintos Peñaranda (2008), the emotions, emotional evaluations, empathetic understanding and primary tolerance or intolerance all automatically come into play, as mechanisms which help us adapt to the world and preserve our life and our social coexistence. Hoffman (2002) believes that there are five models of empathetic arousal, three of which are primary, automatic and involuntary, namely: mimicry (we observe the expression and we imitate it); classical conditioning (anyone can have empathetic feelings as a conditioned reflex); direct association (to remember similar experiences in their own past); and association through verbal mediation and role-taking.

Role-taking is a process whereby people attempt to put themselves in the shoes of another person and imagine how he or she feels. According to Hoffman, there are three types of role-taking. The “self-centred role-taking attitude” is when people imagine they

are the victim, allowing them to feel what the victim is feeling as if it were happening to them. Secondly, the “hetero-centred role-taking attitude” is when the victim is viewed externally, and rather than putting oneself in the victim’s shoes, they use all of the information they have about the victim in order to arrive at a conclusion as to what they would be feeling. Finally, Hoffman distinguishes a third type of role-taking involving a combination of the first two types.

Given that there are different types of empathy, three of which are automatic, empathy could play a leading role when interpreting emotional issues, as it causes changes in the interpreter’s and the audience’s behaviour. In addition, since people supposedly empathise more with people of the same gender, the interpreter’s gender is likely to be significant in determining the quality of the interpretation.

This paper presents a study which includes an experiment, a questionnaire for the interpreters and a survey for a highly representative audience, the aim of which was to determine how and to what extent the gender of an interpreter may affect his/her interpretation and whether this factor affects the audience’s perception of the interpretation.

Objectives

The main aim was to analyse the amount of information conveyed by a group of male interpreters in comparison to a group of female interpreters in a SI situation with an emotionally-charged content where the original text was produced by a female speaker in order to determine whether empathy influenced these two groups differently and, if so, in what way.

The second aim was to determine whether the interpreters considered that the result of the SI was affected by the emotive nature of the original text by generating higher or lower levels of empathy, whether their own work was of higher or lower quality when the levels of empathy were higher and, finally, whether they believe that the gender of the interpreter should be the same as that of the person interpreted.

The final aim was to determine whether the respondents who played the role of a fake audience were able to determine whether the SI target text transcription had been produced by a male or a female interpreter.

Analysis 1

The first study was an experiment intended to assess the amount of information transmitted during an SI assignment conveying a highly empathetic content produced by a group of female interpreters in comparison to the quantity of information transmitted by a group of male interpreters. The initial hypothesis was that people of the same gender would experience a higher degree of empathy towards one another, assuming that the female interpreters would feel more empathy towards the female speaker than the male interpreters.

Materials and subjects

First of all, it was necessary to locate a speech in English to be interpreted into Spanish dealing with a topic that could make an empathetic impact on the interpreters depending on whether their gender coincided or not with that of the person to be interpreted.

It was decided to choose a situation involving violence against women, as this would allow us to research whether empathy affected the group of female interpreters (the experimental group) and the group of male interpreters (the control group) in the same way.

For this purpose, a 15-minute speech was selected which could be interpreted with relative ease by the subjects, all of whom were students of advanced SI at the University of Vigo. The speech needed to be no more than 15 minutes long, relatively simple, avoiding any difficulties other than the emotive difficulty and produced at a rate of no more than 120 words per minute. The speaker's accent and the linguistic register both also needed to be neutral. The speech had to be very emotive, powerful and able to transmit the severity of the situation and awaken feelings of empathy. It also needed to be descriptive and have a high level of audio quality. Finally, in order to render the situation as real as possible, the

interpreters had to directly see the speaker (in the role of the victim). This fictitious situation was intended to seem real enough for the interpreters to be easily empathetically affected by the speech. Together with a short written introductory text containing terminology and a glossary with key words and more complicated phrases, a small introductory text was read out beforehand in order to familiarise the interpreters with the context.

An authentic text was chosen from a social forum where a woman recounts her experience of being raped. Choosing the speech was one of the most difficult parts of the research owing to the scarcity of speeches with the aforementioned characteristics, the lack of which would be liable to adversely affect the final results of the experiment.

The subjects of the first study involved a group of 11 advanced interpreting students (aged 21-22) studying a degree in Translation and Interpreting, five of which were men and six were women. Since the object of the study was to detect potential differences between the interpretations of male versus female interpreters, the subjects were divided into two groups: one made up exclusively of male interpreters and the other of female interpreters.

Methodology

A native English speaker recorded herself reading the story at a speed of 120 words per minute. Because the interpreters were students, the speaker was asked to convey the message with perfect diction in order to avoid distractions for the interpreters. Finally, the speaker was asked to act with a certain level of anxiety in her voice as if she were the victim of violence in order to transmit the same feeling to the subjects. A recorded video was screened to the interpreters showing a silhouetted woman sitting in a darkened room with her back to the camera and making some gestures.

The subjects were informed about the topic of the text they were to interpret and some contextual information and basic vocabulary was provided when they entered the booth. Each interpreter performed in their own individual booth and all of the subjects had visual access to the video and could hear the audio recording clearly.

Results

The focus of the first study was the quantity of information transmitted, i.e. the number of omissions and significant deviations from the source text.

The average error rating made by the female interpreters was 8.5, whereas the average error rating made by the male interpreters was 7.8.

There was no significant difference in terms of the quantity of information conveyed, although it is interesting to compare what the female interpreters as a group omitted as opposed to the male interpreters. There is a part in the video, between min 4'07" and min 4'30", in which the words of the woman are "I blacked out completely. When I woke up, they were holding my hands and feet apart and one guy was still on top of me and I was still a virgin so it hurts in that area". When interpreting this part of the video, all of the female interpreters omitted that she "was still a virgin", whereas the male interpreters did not. The sound and the speed with which the victim says this are both completely clear and there is no other variable which distorts the utterance, and yet the female interpreters omitted it.

Analysis 2

The second study was a post-experimental questionnaire for the subjects of the first study, the purpose of which was to analyse the questionnaire given to the interpreters on the first day of the study when they were asked about their perception of the quality produced in their interpretation as well as the bearing that psychological factors had on this kind of interpreting.

Materials and subjects

The material used for this analysis was a short questionnaire to be filled in by the subjects which included ten questions about issues relating to the interpreter's gender and their sexual orientation, as well as the potential difficulties that they may have encountered during the interpretation. They were asked to respond to questions about whether they had empathised with the victim, the sensations they felt when interpreting and whether

their perception of the quality of their interpretation had been positively or negatively affected.

Methodology

Immediately after the interpretation described, all of the subjects were given a short written questionnaire that they were asked to fill in without leaving the booth so that the sensations they experienced would be fresh in their minds. They were given as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaire.

Results

The results of the questionnaire indicated that the men were just as likely to have experienced difficulties when interpreting as the women. ‘Psychological factors’ was one such difficulty that was chosen by all subjects alike.

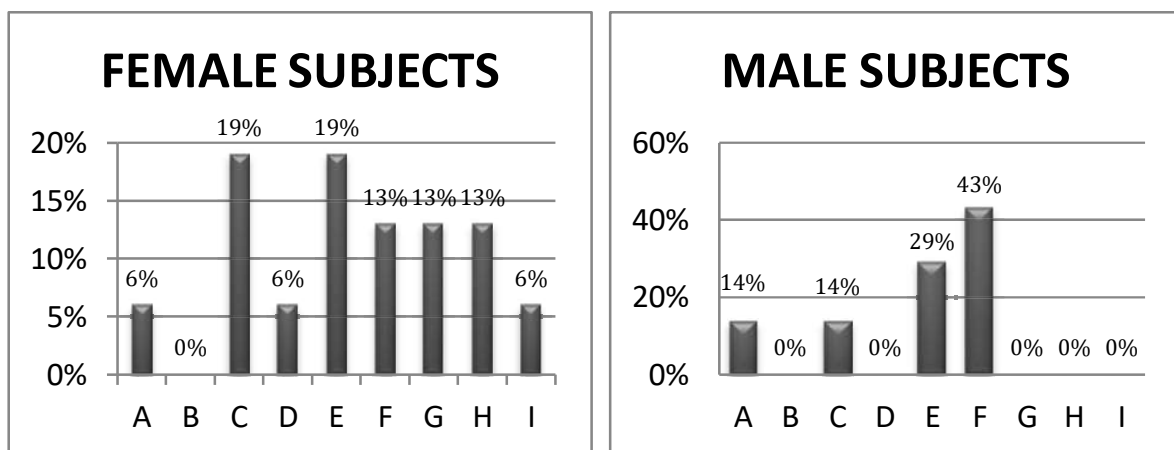


Figure 1. Types of empathy demonstrated by the group of female subjects vs. male subjects.

- A) You felt the same by imitation/automatic reflex.
- B) You remembered similar experiences in your past.
- C) You remembered experiences seen in the media.
- D) You remembered past experiences of a family member.
- E) You could feel the anxiety transmitted by her breathing and verbal language.
- F) You imagined what she felt externally (she as a victim).
- G) You imagined yourself in her place (you as victim).

H) Letter F) and G) simultaneously.

I) You imagined someone close to you in her situation.

When it came to empathy, 43% of the men were of the same opinion that they put themselves in the victim's position and imagined what she as a victim would have been feeling on an external level. However, in the female group, their memories of the communication media were much more visual, with 19% choosing this option.

When asked whether empathy had influenced them in some way, 50% of the women acknowledged that they had, while 60% of the men said no. In response to the question about whether this influenced them positively or negatively, the women believed that they had been influenced negatively, whereas the men replied that they had not been negatively affected.

Analysis 3

The third study involved 18 subjects who were then asked to say whether the target text had been produced by a male or a female interpreter. The subjects were divided into two groups, one of which consisted of Translation, Interpreting and Philology students with a greater knowledge of language in comparison to a group of people whose field of study was in no way related to Linguistics. The hypothesis was that the first group should probably be able to distinguish the subtleties of linguistic characteristics between a female and a male interpreter far better than the second group comprised of people studying or working in unrelated fields.

Results

The survey does not aim to identify any features construed as being characteristic of male or female speech, but rather to ascertain whether such features are perceived to exist and whether they can be identified as such by a general or specialist audience. Were that to prove to be the case, it could be taken as indicative of the need to suggest that in the interest of rendering the final product more coherent, only women should interpret women when dealing with topics as emotive as that discussed here.

The results were as follows:

The ‘general’ audience obtained a success rate of 61.82%, equivalent to 34 successful responses out of a total of 55, whereas the ‘professional’ group obtained a success rate of 63.63%, equivalent to 91 successful responses out of a total of 143.

Taken together, the ‘general’ and ‘professional’ groups obtained an average success rate of 61.36%, equivalent to 108 successful responses out of a total of 176.

Discussion and Conclusions

Regarding the first objective concerning quantitative variance in the information transmitted during simultaneous interpreting depending on the interpreter’s gender, it can be concluded that although there was a small difference in what the males and females interpreted on topics which may arouse empathy in the listener, this difference is insufficient to determine that the gender of the speaker should coincide with that of the interpreter. Nor was it possible to conclude that empathy affected the women any more than it did the men given the error difference of 0.7%.

The results of the survey (Analysis 2) indicated that the men identified more with the speaker than the female interpreters, with 43% of the male interpreters hetero-centrally positioned in the victim’s place, as opposed to the sum total of only 39% for women. Such high levels of empathy in the male interpreter group could perhaps be the result of a feeling of guilt for initially having automatically identified with the aggressors due to their gender, such as the phenomenon posited by Freshbach and Roe (1968).

In the questionnaire, the women said that empathy had negatively influenced them while interpreting which is perhaps why they obtained lower results in the analysis of information transmitted. Nevertheless, the men who responded that empathy had influenced them while interpreting indicated that it positively influenced them and they obtained better results in the first analysis. As such, in this case, positioning the hetero-centred other appeared to help the male interpreters to transmit more information in their interpretation. Therefore, the results tend to indicate that when interpreting gender-bound empathic topics, interpreters should be of the opposite gender to the speaker, although the differences were too small to draw firm in this regard.

The results of the third analysis indicated clearly that distinctive, albeit unidentified, linguistic traits are descensible in the speech of male and female interpreters, with a successful response rate of 61.34%. Therefore, speech would seem to vary in simultaneous interpreting depending upon the interpreter's gender just as it has been shown to vary in sign language interpreting (Manson 2008), legal interpreting (Arabski & Wojtaszek 2011) and in consecutive interpreting (Brück 2011).

In conclusion, although these three studies have drawn results, they are both conflicting and inconclusive. It cannot be concluded that the relation between the interpreter's gender and the victim's gender had any bearing on potential communication problems. However, distinctive discursive factors appear to exist making it possible to distinguish between the speech of female and male interpreters. Further research is required to determine the influence that the interpreter's gender may have when dealing with such topics.

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