

Interpreters' notes

On the choice of language

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This paper reports on a small-scale empirical study on note-taking in consecutive interpreting. As data, the study draws on the notes produced by four subjects while interpreting one Spanish source text consecutively into Danish, on the one hand, and one Danish source text into Spanish, on the other. The aim of the study is to explore what governs conference interpreters' choice of language for their notes. The categories traditionally used to discuss, describe and explain this choice are those of *source language* and *target language*, and these categories are therefore subject to particular scrutiny here. However, somewhat surprisingly, the results of the analyses indicate that the choice of language in note-taking is governed mainly by the status of the language in the interpreters' language combination, i.e. whether it is an A- or a B-language, and much less by its status in the interpreting task, i.e. whether it functions as the source or the target language. Drawing on the concept of processing capacity and the Effort Model of consecutive, a tentative explanation of these findings is suggested.

Keywords: consecutive interpreting, note-taking, source language, target language, A-language, B-language, interpreting direction, language combination, processing capacity, Effort Model

1. Introduction

The issue of conference interpreters' notes has attracted a fair amount of attention over the years and has generated a large volume of literature (e.g. Herbert 1952; Rozan 1956; van Hoof 1962; Seleskovitch 1975; Kirchhoff 1979; Ilg 1980, 1982, 1988; Déjean Le Féal 1981; Thiéry 1981; Paneth 1984; Allioni 1989; Matyssek 1989; Gran 1990; Laplace 1990; Alexieva 1993; Ilg & Lambert 1996;

Andres 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Ahrens 2001, 2003). So far, most of the literature has mainly aimed at giving recommendations about what interpreters' notes should look like or how note-taking should be taught — if at all. However, most of these recommendations are offered on the basis of personal experience and/or opinions only, and, often, they point in different directions.

The question of interpreters' choice of language for their notes is a case in point. Some scholars advocate a largely language-independent system for note-taking, an ideal posited in particular by Matyssek (1989), who, however, adds that when this ideal cannot be achieved, the interpreter's mother tongue is to be preferred because of its status as the better mastered language. However, apart from Matyssek, most authors in the field of note-taking tend to take one of two opposing positions: some recommend using the target language (TL) (e.g. Herbert 1952; Rozan 1956; Seleskovitch 1975; Déjean Le Féal 1981; Seleskovitch & Lederer 1989; Mikkelsen 1983; Laplace 1990; AIIC 1994), whereas others argue that the source language (SL) may be a better choice (e.g. Ilg 1988; Alexieva 1993; Gile 1995). Those who recommend using the target language do so basically for two reasons: for one thing, the target-language option logically forces the interpreter to move away from the surface form of the incoming speech and should therefore ensure better processing of the speech; for another, writing in the target language is thought to facilitate production of the target speech. The relatively smaller group of authors who question the TL recommendation tend to do so on the grounds that writing notes in the target language requires language conversion during note-taking and therefore adds to the number of functions that the interpreter has to perform during the listening phase — a phase characterized by being paced by the speaker, unlike the production phase, and theoretically also by a higher degree of complexity, insofar as it is assumed to comprise more capacity-consuming components than the production phase (cf. Daniel Gile's Effort Model of consecutive interpreting, for example in Gile 1995: 178–180). In spite of this fundamental disagreement on the question of language choice, there is general agreement that the relevant categories when it comes to talking about the language of interpreters' notes are those of *source language* and *target language* (for overviews of the discussions on language choice for note-taking in the literature, consult Ilg & Lambert 1996, Kalina 1998 and Dam, in press).

In the present paper, the relevance of these categories for descriptions of language choice in note-taking will be addressed. Unlike most of the existing literature on interpreters' notes, this paper shall not be concerned with optimum choice or recommendations, in this case with the question of which language is

to be recommended for note-taking in the teaching and professional practice of consecutive interpreting. Rather, I shall be interested in exploring *what governs conference interpreters' choice of language for their notes in actual interpreting practice and, in particular, whether and to what extent the traditional categories of source language and target language are in fact useful to describe this choice.*

These questions will be addressed through an empirical study, which will be reported on in Sections 3, 4 and 5 below. First, however, I shall take a brief look at the existing empirical research that deals with interpreters' choice of language for their notes in consecutive.

2. Previous empirical research

As hinted above, the empirical evidence we have on interpreters' choice of language for note-taking is limited. Among the few empirical studies that have been published on interpreters' notes, only three have addressed the question of language choice explicitly, albeit briefly, namely Seleskovitch (1975), Kirchhoff (1979)¹ and Andres (2002a). All three scholars mention that they have observed a mixture of source and target language — apart from symbols and some words in a third language — in all (Seleskovitch 1975: 158) or almost all (Kirchhoff 1979: 123; Andres 2002a: 101–102) of the notes comprised in their respective corpora. Andres adds that the notes in her corpus tend to be SL-oriented (Andres 2002a: 101–102), whereas Seleskovitch reports a high degree of variability between subjects as regards their choice of language: in some notes the source language dominates, in others the target language is dominant, and in others again a balanced mixture of both languages can be observed (Seleskovitch 1975: 158). However, due to their qualitative nature, the studies by Seleskovitch, Kirchhoff and Andres contain little, if any, precise quantitative information on the distribution of the analysed notes over source and target language.

One attempt at quantifying the use of source language and target language, respectively, has been made in a pilot study (Dam, in press), in which several issues concerning conference interpreters' notes were addressed, including the question of language choice. The analysed data consisted of five sets of notes produced by five professional interpreters who had interpreted the same Spanish source text consecutively into Danish. The interpreters all had Danish as their native language (A-language) and Spanish as a foreign language (B- or C-language). The categories chosen to describe language choice in the notes

were first and foremost the traditional ones, i.e. (1) target language and (2) source language. Two additional categories were included, namely (3) notes in a third language and (4) notes in a not identifiable language, which covered notes for which the language could not be determined because their form would be identical in the source language, the target language and/or a 3rd language. In Table 1 below, in which the results of the quantitative part of the language analysis are summarised, these four categories are referred to as TL, SL, 3rd L and ?, respectively.

Table 1. Distribution of language-based notes (words and abbreviations) over languages (Dam, in press)

Language	Subject 1	Subject 2	Subject 3	Subject 4	Subject 5	Mean
TL	58%	63%	87%	77%	77%	72%
SL	25%	12%	2%	2%	8%	10%
3rd L	5%	16%	–	1%	–	5%
?	12%	10%	12%	20%	15%	14%

As we can see in Table 1, all the interpreters show a strong preference for taking notes in the target language, and tend to use the source language to a much lesser degree. Based on these results alone it would therefore appear that the language recommended by most authors in the interpreting community, i.e. the target language, is also the language preferred in actual interpreting practice. However, this would clearly be a premature conclusion based on a too restricted sample of data. For example, the interpreters who served as subjects all had the same language combination, and the task they performed covered only one interpreting direction, namely from a foreign language into the subjects' native language (i.e. from their B- or C-language into their A-language). The study therefore contained too few language variables to allow any conclusions to be drawn on language preferences in note-taking.

In order to explore what factors govern interpreters' choice of language for their notes, I subsequently conducted a study which contained more language variables than the previous one. The rest of this paper is dedicated to a presentation of this new study. Thus, in Section 3 the data used are briefly described, Section 4 presents the results of the analyses that were conducted to explore the central questions of the study as stated (in italics) in Section 1, and Section 5 contains a conclusion and a discussion of the results and methods.

3. Data

The data used for the present study comprise two times four — or a total of eight — sets of notes. The notes were produced in the context of an ordinary classroom session during which four student interpreters interpreted one Spanish source text consecutively into Danish (task 1), and the same four students interpreted one Danish source text consecutively into Spanish (task 2). The topic of both source texts was EU competition policy with a focus on the concept of unfair competition. The four subjects were studying for a European Masters in Conference Interpreting at the Copenhagen Business School (Denmark), and they performed the two interpreting tasks three weeks before the final exams. Their training in note-taking had largely been based upon the principles proposed by Rozan (1956), but at the same time the individual nature of note-taking had been stressed throughout the course. The question of language choice had been discussed during class, but the students had been given no specific recommendations, except for general advice to take notes in whichever language came to their mind when listening to the source speech. Three of the subjects had Danish as their native language (A-language) and Spanish as a foreign language (B-language). The fourth subject had the inverse language combination: Spanish A and Danish B. Thus, different interpreting directions (B into A, and A into B) and different language combinations (Danish A and Spanish B, and vice versa) are represented in the present study.

During task 1 (Spanish into Danish), one subject (subject 1) wrote a total of 101 note units (words, abbreviations or symbols), of which 72 units (71%) were language based, i.e. either words or abbreviations; the second subject (subject 2) took down a total of 120 note units, of which 95 (79%) were language based; the third (subject 3) wrote a total of 125 note units, of which 85 (68%) were language based; the fourth (subject 4) noted a total of 116 units, of which 74 (64%) were language based.

During task 2 (Danish into Spanish), subject 1 wrote a total of 119 note units, of which 92 (77%) were language based; subject 2 took down a total of 179 units, of which 132 (74%) were language based; subject 3 wrote a total of 190 units, of which 160 (84%) were language based; subject 4 noted a total of 162 units, of which 126 (78%) were language based.

It is the language-based note units that form the basis of the analyses of language choice below.

4. Analyses and results

In the present study, two analyses of note language were conducted: one in which the categorization used was identical with the one used in my previous study (cf. Table 1), i.e. a categorization based primarily on the traditional categories of source and target language, and one in which the categorization was based mainly on the status of the language in the interpreter's language combination (i.e. A or B). The first analysis is presented in Section 4.1 and the second in Section 4.2.

4.1 Choice of source vs. target language

As stated, in the first analysis the categorization of language choice in the analysed notes is based on the traditional categories of 'source language' (SL) and 'target language' (TL), apart from the categories labelled 'third language' (3rd L) and 'not identifiable' (?).

As explained in Section 3, the four subjects interpreted two speeches: one from Spanish into Danish (task 1), and one from Danish into Spanish (task 2). The results obtained from the language analysis of the notes produced in the course of task 1, **Spanish into Danish**, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution over languages of notes produced during task 1, Spanish-into-Danish: categorization based on source-/target-language status

Language	Subject 1 A = Danish	Subject 2 A = Danish	Subject 3 A = Danish	Subject 4 A = Spanish
TL (Danish)	81%	74%	78%	3%
SL (Spanish)	4%	6%	4%	77%
3rd L	1%	2%	–	–
?	14%	18%	19%	20%

As we can see in Table 2, the language patterns in the notes produced by subjects 1, 2 and 3 are quite similar across subjects. Thus, by far the largest part of the notes made by these three subjects are written in the target language (81%, 74% and 78%, respectively), whereas only very few notes are taken down in the source language (4%, 6% and 4%, respectively), and even fewer — if any — in a third language. We may note that these results and the results obtained in my first study (cf. Table 1 in the present paper) are convergent, and as such they may seem to provide evidence of target-language dominance in note-taking.

However, the language pattern in the notes produced by subject 4 is exactly the opposite of the pattern found in the notes made by subjects 1 to 3 in the present analysis — and by all the subjects in my first study. Thus, by far the largest part of subject 4's notes is written in the source language (77%), whereas the use of the target language is very limited (3%). The performance of subject 4, then, does not lend support to an interpretation of the results as evidence of target-language dominance in note-taking.

Why these radical differences in the subjects' performances, then? One obvious explanation would be that the subjects perform differently because they work under different conditions. Thus, subjects 1–3 work from their B-language into their A-language, whereas subject 4 works from her A into her B. Seen from this perspective, it is in fact possible to identify a common denominator in the performances of all the subjects, namely that they write most of their notes in their A-language and very few in their B-language. Conversely, as pointed out above, there is no agreement among the subjects to take notes in the target language. Therefore, the results suggest that note-taking-language preference correlates more strongly with the status of the language in the interpreter (i.e. A or B) than with the status of the language in the task (i.e. SL or TL).

The patterns found in the analyses above are corroborated by the results of the language analysis of the notes produced in the course of task 2, **Danish-into-Spanish**, which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution over languages of notes produced during task 2, Danish-into-Spanish: categorization based on source-/target-language status

Language	Subject 1 A = Danish	Subject 2 A = Danish	Subject 3 A = Danish	Subject 4 A = Spanish
TL (Spanish)	–	–	–	87%
SL (Danish)	82%	77%	86%	2%
3rd L	4%	11%	1%	2%
?	14%	11%	13%	10%

As we can see in Table 3, in the performances of subjects 1, 2 and 3, who interpret from A into B this time, the target-language dominance observed in the B-into-A task (cf. Table 2) has disappeared completely. In fact, when interpreting from A into B, these three interpreters take no notes at all in the target language. Rather, they write by far the largest part of their notes in the source language (82%, 77% and 86%, respectively). As to the notes made by subject 4, who works from B into A here, the language pattern is exactly the

opposite, with the largest part of the notes written in the target language (87%) and only very few in the source language (2%). Also, the distribution of the notes produced by subject 4 during task 2 is the opposite of the distribution found in the notes she produced during task 1, when she interpreted in the opposite direction (cf. Table 2).

The results of the analyses of the notes from task 2 therefore clearly corroborate the task-1 results: note-taking-language preference correlates more strongly with the status of the language in the interpreter's language combination (A or B) than with source-/target-language status. The results therefore suggest that, generally speaking, rather than a preference for the target language over the source language, a preference for A-language over B-language may be at play.

4.2 Choice of A- vs. B-language

The analyses presented in this section are not based on new data or statistics, but simply represent a different way of organizing the results already shown in Section 4.1. Whereas those results were organized according to the traditional categories of source and target language, the categorization of the data in the present section is based primarily on the status of the language in the interpreter's language combination (A or B) — a variable that according to the analyses in Section 4.1 appears to have a strong influence on the choice of language in note-taking. The analyses presented here therefore serve primarily to clarify the correlations found in Section 4.1, but they will also allow some additional observations, as will become clear below.

In the present analyses, then, the language-based notes were ascribed to one of the following categories: (1) A-language, (2) B-language, (3) 3rd language or (4) not identifiable language (A, B, 3rd L and ?, respectively).

Table 4 shows the results obtained from the analyses of the notes produced by subjects 1, 2 and 3 during task 1, and of the notes produced by subject 4 during task 2. This means that in the representation of the results in Table 4, the subjects interpreted different source texts, but worked in the same interpreting direction, namely **from B into A**.

To complete the picture, Table 5 shows the results of the analyses of the notes produced by subjects 1, 2 and 3 during task 2, and of the notes produced by subject 4 during task 1. Thus, here too, the subjects interpreted different source texts, but again they all worked in the same interpreting direction, in this case **from A into B**.

Tables 4 and 5 clearly show a consensus among the subjects to take far more

Table 4. The distribution over languages of the notes produced by the subjects while interpreting from B into A: categorization based on A- and B-language status

Language	Subject 1 Task 1	Subject 2 Task 1	Subject 3 Task 1	Subject 4 Task 2
A (= TL)	81%	74%	78%	87%
B (= SL)	4%	6%	4%	2%
3rd L	1%	2%	–	2%
?	14%	18%	19%	10%

Table 5. The distribution over languages of the notes produced by the subjects while interpreting from A into B: categorization based on A- and B-language status

Language	Subject 1 Task 2	Subject 2 Task 2	Subject 3 Task 2	Subject 4 Task 1
A (= SL)	82%	77%	86%	77%
B (= TL)	–	–	–	3%
3rd L	4%	11%	1%	–
?	14%	11%	13%	20%

notes in their A-language than in their B-language. This A-language preference applies regardless of whether this language functions as the target language, as in Table 4, or as the source language, as in Table 5.

Still, there are some small differences between the results derived from the B-into-A tasks, as shown in Table 4, and those obtained from the A-into-B tasks, as shown in Table 5. As we can see in Table 4, the four subjects agree to take at least some, albeit few, notes in their B-language when they interpret from B into A, i.e. when the B-language functions as the source language. This is not so when the subjects interpret from A into B, i.e. when the B-language functions as the target language, as can be derived from Table 5. Thus, only subject 4 takes notes in her B-language when interpreting from A into B, whereas the other three subjects take no notes at all in their B-language when that language functions as the target language. Furthermore, subjects 1–3 take slightly more notes in their A-language when this language functions as the source language than when it represents the target language (subject 1: 82% when A=SL vs. 81% when A=TL; subject 2: 77% vs. 74%; subject 3: 86% vs. 78%). It should be noted that these differences are very small, and that the described pattern of shifts between A- and B-language notes depending on the source- vs. target-language dichotomy cannot be found in the performances of

subject 4. The evidence of such shifts is therefore very limited, but as we shall see later, this phenomenon fits nicely into current theories in the field of interpreting (see the tentative explanation of the results in Section 5 below).

In sum, Tables 4 and 5 show that there is a strong preference for taking notes in the A-language, which applies regardless of whether this language functions as source or target language. Conversely, the use of the B-language is very rare. In the few cases where the B-language is in fact used, this is almost exclusively when it functions as the source language, whereas it is hardly ever used when it serves as the target language. Consequently, even if the impact of the parameters of A- vs. B-language appears to be strong, and certainly stronger than the effect of source vs. target language, the possibility that the latter parameters also have some influence on language choice in note-taking cannot be completely ruled out.

5. Conclusion and discussion

On the basis of the above analyses, it is now possible to suggest some — provisional — answers to the questions formulated in the introduction (see the italicized passage in Section 1). Generally speaking, the choice of language in note-taking seems to be governed mainly by the status of the language in the interpreter's language combination, i.e. whether it is an A- or a B-language, and much less by its status in the task, i.e. whether it is the source or the target language. This finding is in line with the ideas of Matyssek (1989), but, on the whole, it is in contradiction with past and present thinking in the interpreting community, where discussions and even research on interpreters' choice of language in note-taking generally continue to hinge upon the categories of source and target language (cf. Sections 1 and 2). Although the usefulness of these categories cannot be ruled out in the context of teaching and training, in which they are also primarily used, their relevance in empirical studies of actual note-taking appears to be much more limited. Still, even for the purpose of empirical studies, the importance of source and target language cannot be discarded all together. Thus, in the above analyses there were some small indications to suggest that these parameters do affect the choice of language in note-taking, as most of the subjects make a small shift from A- towards B-language when the B-language functions as the source language, and vice versa.

These findings are in fact both intuitively and theoretically plausible. A possible explanation of the results would be the following:

In a general attempt to minimize efforts — for example in order to save processing capacity for other task requirements during the note-taking phase, such as listening to and analyzing the incoming speech (cf. Daniel Gile's Effort Model of consecutive) — interpreters are likely to take notes in whichever language is easier and therefore faster. Other things being equal, writing in one's first language, i.e. A-language, is likely to be easier/faster than writing in one's B-language because of the probable differences in the levels of mastery of these languages, as also suggested by Matyssek (1989: 138–140). On the other hand, in terms of ease of processing and writing, source-/target-language status may also play a role. Thus, taking notes in the source language is theoretically easier/faster than in the target language, because in the former case the interpreter can simply write down (part of) what s/he hears, either verbatim or using other words; even if s/he chooses the more demanding route of reformulation, the source-language option should still be less demanding, as the interpreter would not have to work with two codes — or languages — simultaneously. Taking notes in the target language is different: as two languages — that of the incoming speech and that of the notes — are concurrently present, language conversion or simultaneous activation of two languages becomes an additional requirement and the note-taking task consequently more demanding (cf. the discussion in Section 1 and in Gile 1995: 182).

Theoretically speaking, the question is therefore not so much whether to take notes in the source language or in the target language, as is generally assumed, but rather whether to write in the A-language or in the source language. In other words, A-language and source language are likely to be the competing parameters in note-taking, whereas B-language and target language are theoretically less attractive choices. This may be why we see practically no correlations between A-into-B interpreting and notes in the TL/B-language in the present study (cf. Table 5): when the two parameters that represent ease and speed in note-taking, i.e. source language and A-language, coincide, this language becomes the obvious choice of code for the notes as well. The situation changes when these two parameters do not coincide, i.e. when the A-language functions as the target language, or, put differently, when the source language is a B-language. In this case the interpreter faces a real choice. Judging from the notes that have been analysed here, there can be little doubt that, when faced with this choice, at least would-be interpreters generally choose the A-language over the source language (cf. Table 4). Nevertheless, the source-language factor is occasionally stronger than the A-language factor. This is likely to be the case when taking down a word verbatim — in the source language — is easier and

therefore faster than using the better-mastered language — the A-language — for example when no target-language equivalent is readily available, or when a source-text word or passage is experienced as difficult. (For a detailed discussion and a small-scale study of the correlation between source-text difficulty and language choice in note-taking, see Dam in press).

However plausible the findings of the present study may seem, it should be stressed that they can only be regarded as preliminary due to the nature of the data on which they are based — in particular due to the small size of the sample and the fact that students rather than professional interpreters served as subjects. These weaknesses are partly offset, however. The small sample size is to some extent compensated through the remarkably high degree of agreement both within and between subjects, in combination with the unusually clear language patterns found in the data. Thus, not only does the main finding, i.e. the A-language dominance in the notes, come out as a very clear result of the analyses (the average proportion of notes in the A-language in all the analysed notes is 80.25%), it also characterizes the performances of all four interpreters in both tasks (at no point does any interpreter write less than 74% of her notes in her A-language). In this connection it should be borne in mind that the notes that were categorized as A-language notes in this study were unmistakably notes in that language, since all cases of doubt were relegated to the category of ‘notes in a not identifiable language’ (the category referred to as ‘?’ in the tables). We may therefore conclude that the variability in the performances of the individual interpreters, which Seleskovitch in particular reports having observed in her corpus (Seleskovitch 1975: 158, cf. Section 2) does not apply to the data analysed here.

As to the weakness represented by the use of student interpreters as subjects, this was assessed through a comparison between the note-taking performances of the students in the present study and those of the professional interpreters who served as subjects in my previous study on interpreters’ notes (Dam in press, cf. Section 2). This comparison showed that the students’ performances do not deviate substantially from those of the professional interpreters. For illustration, we may compare Table 1 (Section 2) and Table 4 (Section 4.2) — i.e. professionals’ vs. students’ performances — derived on the basis of notes produced in similar conditions: most importantly here, all the subjects interpreted from a foreign into their native language (from B or C into A).² When matching the results in the two tables, we can for example see that the professional interpreters write between 58% and 87% of their notes in the target language, which here coincides with their A-language, and between 2% and 25% of their notes in the source language, which is their B-language. The

students write between 74% and 87% of their notes in the target language/A-language, and between 2% and 6% in the source language/B-language. These figures show that although the professionals generally write fewer notes in the target/A-language (72% on average) and more notes in the source/B-language (10%) than the students (80% and 4%, respectively), no single student interpreter writes fewer or more notes in either the target/A-language or the source/B-language than any of the professional interpreters. In other words, the performances of the students lie within the range of those of the professionals. Consequently, the use of students as subjects was considered to be methodologically safe in this specific study, where the focus is on general trends rather than on differences or variations.

Still, there is of course no doubt that studying data produced by a representative selection of randomly chosen professional interpreters working in authentic settings would be preferable to working with data generated in a classroom by a handful of students who happened to be available. Here is the challenge for future studies on note-taking — indeed for all studies on interpreting.

Notes

1. The study by Kirchhoff is not empirical in the traditional sense, with explicit descriptions of the data on which it is based, but it does draw on a so-called “Belegkorpus” (Kirchhoff 1979: 123), which allows empirically based observations.
2. One difference is that whereas all the students interpreted from a B-language, only two of the professionals worked from a B-language (subjects 1 and 3, cf. Table 1), while the other three (subjects 2, 4 and 5) interpreted from a C-language. However, no systematic differences can be found in terms of language choice between the interpreters who worked from a B and those who worked from a C (see Table 1). Consequently, this difference in conditions is disregarded here, and, for reasons of simplicity and readability, all foreign — rather than native — languages are referred to as ‘B-languages’, even if some of them are in fact C-languages.

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