FAST DELIVERY IN SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION

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Fast speech is the arch enemy of simultaneous interpreters. Prior preparation may address deficiencies in knowledge and terminology, and to some extent, alleviate the pressure of fast delivery. But if the speed is beyond a certain limit, no interpreter can transmit the message in full, even if the interpreter is an expert in the subject. This is even more so when the structures of the source and target languages differ substantially. The reason is simple. All interpreters have limited mental capacity.

In simultaneous interpretation (SI), interpreters have to allocate attention among several tasks: listening and analysis, production, short term memory and coordination (Gile 1995: 161). When a speaker's delivery is rapid, listening and analysis alone will consume almost all the interpreter's energy. Little energy will be left for production, especially when production involves complicated language restructuring.

The human brain is like a washing machine. The drum must never be overloaded with laundry, or there will be no room for spinning, and cleaning will not be thorough. Likewise, fast speeches overload the brain with too much information within a specific time span, leaving no room for proper processing of information to produce a coherent translation.

Problems of Fast Speech

Delivering fast speeches in an international conference may lead to several problems: First, mistranslation and loss of information. There is a maximum output that an interpreter can produce within a given time interval; the greater the input, the greater the chance of error and omission. Secondly, fast delivery makes comprehension difficult even when the audience is listening to a native language. Thirdly, English is a non-native language to many, if not most, international conference participants. Participants lose information when either the speaker or the interpreter speaks too fast.

What is the optimal speech rate for English?

To ensure the proper functioning of the interpreter's brain, the speaker must speak at an appropriate speed. Studies show that speech rate has a direct correlation with interpretation quality. Accuracy is reduced as the speech gets faster. Interpreters generally believe that, to ensure the quality of interpretation, a rate between 100 and 120 (English) words per minute (wpm) is optimal for speeches that are not read from a written text, although the figure may differ for different types of speech. Lederer suggested that for recited texts which are devoid of hesitation and redundancy that characterize official speeches, the maximum rate should be 100 wpm (Gerver 1969; Seleskovitch 1978; Lederer 1981; as cited in Chang 2005: 12).

Coping with Fast Speeches

Interpreters have to find coping strategies to deal with speeches that are delivered faster than the optimal speed. Based on the author's practice and observation, four strategies may be used: the speaker is advised to slow down, the interpreter speeds up, summarization, termination of service.

Strategy one: Request the speaker to slow down.

This is the first possible tactic when a speaker is speaking too fast; however, one must remember that reminders seldom work, for speakers are either set in their speaking habits, or are always trying to cover too much within a limited time. After being reminded, a speaker will usually slow down for a sentence or two, before quickly forgetting the rules. Also, too-frequent reminders impede communication. A fast rate of speech is a universal challenge for interpreters.

To ensure that speakers speak at a reasonable pace, the efforts of several players are indispensable: interpreters associations/societies, conference organizers, and individuals. As an association of interpreters, AIIC has communicated with institutional users of SI such as the United Nations and the European Union on speakers requirements. As a result of AIICs efforts, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Interpretation issued Tips for Speakers, giving speakers tips on how to deliver speeches when interpreters services are used (Tips for Speakers). One of the tips is to "speak naturally, at a reasonable pace. If speakers could observe the tips, interpretation quality would be greatly enhanced. In dealing with ad hoc users of interpretation services, interpreters should communicate with the conference organizer, requesting speakers to speak at a reasonable pace. At small and more personal meetings, interpreters may communicate directly with the speakers. Most speakers are quite ready to cooperate, and would even request interpreters to raise their hands at any time when slowing down is needed. As a general rule, interpreters must make known their difficulties to conference organizers and speakers to ensure that they receive the required cooperation.

Strategy Two: The interpreter speeds up.

If the speaker fails to cooperate, the interpreter will have to speed up. The constraint, however, is that speech rate cannot be increased indefinitely. And as mentioned earlier, if a speech is delivered too quickly, most of the interpreter's processing capacity will be devoted to comprehension, leaving little energy and time for translating and speaking the target language. The resulting utterance would be either incoherent or too fast for the audience's comprehension.

Strategy Three: Summarization.

This is a tactic used when the interpreter cannot keep pace with the speaker even with increased speed. The best approach to interpreting speeches with redundant information (such as impromptu speeches) is to summarize. Summary interpretation will produce a more succinct speech than the original. On the other hand, speeches densely packed with information or with complex reasoning cannot be further condensed. Any attempt at summarizing will result in omissions or truncated logic, and the audience will find difficulty following the speaker, particularly when speakers read verbatim and rapidly from written text or in government jargon. Interpreters can only do their best, and translate as much as they are able within the limited time. Having said that, summarization consumes a lot of energy and is not sustainable.

Interpreters familiar with the subject-matter and who understand the audience's needs and the central message can respond faster by capturing essential

information and discarding the trivial. In any case, no amount of familiarity with the subject-matter can compensate for a speech delivered too fast.

Strategy Four: Termination of service.

In the event that working conditions do not meet the interpreters‟ minimum requirements and as a result, interpretation quality is compromised, interpreters may terminate their services. Although the author has not seen any interpreter using this strategy, the author has heard it.

Having said that, interpreters who serve as the bridge between speakers and audience should refrain from turning off the microphone (despite it being one possible strategy) unless absolutely necessary. First of all, not all speakers speak fast, and any speaker's turn will be over very soon. The organizer will understand if the interpretation for that particular segment is not completely satisfactory. Turning off the microphone because of one speaker will attract the audience's attention to the interpreter. Secondly, many conferences provide SI services simply to raise the prestige of the meeting or as part of the complete language service offered at the conference.

If the interpreter determines that this is indeed the case, i.e. meeting participants do not actually use the interpretation service, there is even less necessity to turn off the microphone and attract the organizer's attention to interpreters. Finally, as a protection of the interpreter's interests and to prevent any unnecessary dispute, interpreters should stipulate in their interpretation contracts that the organizers ensure that speakers observe a reasonable rate of speech.

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