

**DILLINGER, Mike (1989): *Component of Simultaneous Interpreting*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of Educational Psychology, McGill University**

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The research reported in this dissertation attempts to address the question of whether there are qualitative differences in processing between novice and experienced interpreters. The author does not address the process of simultaneous interpretation in its entire complexity but rather focusses on the interpreter's comprehension processes, hence leaving translation and production aspects aside. This qualification is important in evaluating the merits of the study.

The author used both experienced interpreters (working in the Canadian market) and inexperienced subjects (bilingual graduate students from Montréal), the size of the sample (8 in each category) corresponding to other experimental research in the field. According to subjects' self-evaluation they were "balanced bilinguals", although 50% of the professional interpreters gave French as their better language, as did 65% of the students. All subjects had to interpret, and afterwards recall, two experimental texts, one narrative and one "procedural" (describing a technical procedure), both presented in English. Each text had been carefully edited and analysed according to frames and propositions, so that the logical and semantic as well as syntactic structure of each text was comprehensively documented.

The analysis of results was carried out along several parameters, such as syntactic processing, the generation of propositions (items of information), density of propositions, and processing of frames (the more complex information structures that characterize texts). Regarding differences in syntactic processing between experienced interpreters and bilingual students ("novice interpreters" — an unfortunate misnomer used by the author) only a weak overall effect on interpreting performance was found. However, the author does not take into account that this may be true only for the two languages used in the study, *i.e.* French and English. Experience did make a difference in proposition generation, the processing stage during which important semantic information is generated from grammatical information. Experience-related differences were found with processing of frames. Overall, then, the differences in comprehension processes between experienced interpreters and bilinguals were subtle, showing up more clearly only processing of more difficult materials, suggesting that special comprehension abilities of professional interpreters will come to bear only when certain variables are present; it appears to me that higher presentation rates, increased density of material, probably also stress and fatigue, to name but a few, would be likely candidates. Unfortunately, the author does not take into account the fact that 25% of the professional interpreters and 6% of the bilingual students had given English as their better language, hence were interpreting into their weaker language, despite the fact they had rated themselves as bilinguals.

The author concludes from his findings that comprehension in interpreting is not a specialized ability, but the application of an existing skill under unusual circumstances. It thus appears to be a natural accompaniment to bilingualism and could as such have important consequences for the training of interpreters. Since professional interpreters overall were only 17% more accurate than their inexperienced bilingual counterparts, the author wonders how much of this improvement is really due to training and how much is

a matter of initial selection. This would put the onus squarely on more developed and accurate selection procedures rather than on the training per se, which could be rather short indeed. However, the author here may be underestimating the importance of the translation and language production phase of the interpreting process. Sometimes it is one thing to have comprehended a passage in the original and quite another to reproduce it within the given time constraints in the target language. These findings suggest moreover that the interpreter's performance is limited by the same parameters that limit text comprehension in general, *i.e.* the type of text, prior knowledge of the interpreter and shared knowledge between interpreter and speaker. This suggests that interpreters would do well specializing more than has been the case hitherto (apparently a trend already on the rise in the market place, as in just the last couple of months I was included in a team only because I had documented expertise in a particular subject).

While this study concentrates on comprehension only, it does so in great detail. Non-psychologists or non-psycholinguists may often find it rough reading, especially with regard to the various cross-comparisons. Here, even the expert would sometimes welcome greater clarity. The reproach so often heard from interpreters regarding experimental research — that the laboratory cannot simulate live conditions — is dealt with by the author in a concise fashion. Arguments such as “the text was not presented in the context of a particular audience”, or “it was not possible to see the speaker”, or “the interpreter was not allowed to prepare for the task” or even that “subjects were not paid”, all receive rather defensive treatment, although one has to concede that none of the arguments have ever been the subject of an empirical study. In some instances, though, the author dismisses certain variables perhaps too casually, as is the case with the lack of preparation for the task. He seems to feel that preparation would have merely emphasized correct terminology rather than increasing prior theoretical knowledge, and since correct terminology made little difference in coding the results, he thinks the differences between the experimental situation and normal practice have been minimized. Obviously, no empirical evidence exists yet that would indicate whether prior preparation simply guarantees correct terminology or in addition increases theoretical knowledge; that of course depends largely on the type of preparation. Lack of prior preparation, however, not only impedes the use of correct terminology but — and this is more significant for the study at hand — entails a more serious negative impact on performance: the time and effort expended to search for the correct term, or a circumlocution, causes the interpreter to fall behind and miss incoming information.

Dillinger's work makes an important contribution to the small body of experimental data available on interpretation. In choosing to limit his study to the comprehension phase of interpreting he could base his research on well developed theoretical knowledge and make use of sophisticated experimental tools. Whether his findings **really** represent this particular phase of interpreting, only further research, encompassing also the transfer and production phases will prove. There, however, theory and tools are not as well developed. The challenge remains!

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