Language choice in note-taking for consecutive interpreting
A topic revisited

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This small-scale empirical study focuses on the language of note-taking in consecutive interpreting. It seeks evidence for or against the proposal by Helle Dam, published in *Interpreting* (6:1, 2004), that the choice of language in interpreters' note-taking is chiefly governed by the status of the language in the subjects’ language combination, as opposed to the status of the given language in the interpreting task (source vs. target language). The data gathered from student interpreters for the present study do not fully support Dam’s finding. Rather, they reveal that interpreters with Hungarian as their A language and English B have a strong tendency to take notes in English, irrespective of the direction of interpreting. These results are taken to suggest that the interpreter’s language combination itself also plays a pivotal role, though perhaps not a primary one, in an interpreter’s choice of note-taking language.

Keywords: consecutive interpreting, morphological complexity, language combination, interpreting direction, note-taking economy, agglutinative language

1. Introduction

When researchers are interested in learning more about the performance of conference interpreters in the consecutive mode, one option is to examine the interpreter’s notes. These can contain valuable information about the target text and may reveal a great deal about both the interpreter’s training and the techniques and strategies s/he employed while performing the particular task. The number of notes jotted down (including full words, abbrevia-
tions and symbols), the language of note-taking, and condensation techniques (deletions, omissions and substitutions) are key areas of interest in an analysis of the interpreter’s performance in the consecutive mode.

The topic of interpreters’ notes has a long tradition in the history of interpreting, but very little empirical research has been conducted on this issue. Published work can be divided into four groups: The first includes the “classics” describing different note-taking systems (Rozan 1956; Becker 1972; Ilg 1980; Allioni 1989; Matyssek 1989); the second group comprises writings that focus on particular aspects of note-taking, such as Lung (1999) on comprehension or Ahrens (2002) on symbols; thirdly, the topic is covered in a considerable number of papers, books and collective volumes related to interpreter training (Bowen & Bowen 1980; Thiery 1981; Gran & Dodds 1989; Seleskovitch & Lederer 1989; Dollerup & Loddegaard 1992; Alexieva 1993; Dollerup & Lindgaard 1994; Ilg & Lambert 1996; Jones 1998; Gillies 2001; Láng 2002); and the fourth group includes publications based on empirical studies (Seleskovitch 1975; Kirchhoff 1979; Dam 1993, 2004a, 2004b; Cai 2001).

Among the most systematic works on note-taking is the doctoral research by Andres (2002), which focuses on expertise and attention management. The greatest strength of the study is the novel technique of note recording whereby the author was able to analyse the exact time-course of note-taking and to identify basic strategies used by professional and student interpreters during consecutive interpreting.

1.1 Focus on the choice of language

Of the several aspects of note-taking presented above, this study will focus on the issue of interpreters’ language choice. Traditionally, researchers have applied two categories when describing language choice in note-taking: the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). Authors writing on consecutive interpreting usually recommend the use of either the SL or the TL for note-taking, but so far no one has offered any empirical evidence to back up this choice. As Dam (2004a) accurately notes in the introduction to her article, which serves as a point of departure for the present paper, there are two opposing camps. The group in support of the TL includes Herbert (1952) and Rozan (1956), both of whom wrote instruction manuals which advocate the use of the TL. Authors with more of a research orientation have taken the same position (e.g. Seleskovitch 1975), as did AIIC members at a 1994 conference in Poznan. In a book written from the practitioner’s point of view, Jones (1998) lists advantages of both the SL and TL approaches but finally expresses a “slight
preference” for the TL (1998: 64). Those advocating the TL consider it a means of facilitating production, and claim that by taking notes in the TL the interpreter can genuinely process the incoming information while listening. Those in favour of the SL (e.g. Kirchhoff 1979; Ilg 1988; Alexieva 1993; Gile 1995) believe that note-taking in the SL is safer because (a) interpreters can minimize their effort and save capacity while listening to the source speech, and perform the linguistic conversion in the production phase, and (b) they can avoid the pitfalls of committing themselves to a certain meaning before having the opportunity to look at the speech as a whole (cf. Dam 2004a: 4).

Dam (2004a) revisited the language issue and reported the results of an empirical study. Although she does not reveal which side she supports in the SL vs. TL debate, her earlier study of five professional interpreters (Dam 2004b) might well have led her to expect a clear TL preference. However, when she introduced another variable, and had the interpreters work into their B language, Dam found a very marked SL orientation. Accordingly, she concluded that the traditional SL–TL dichotomy was not the most appropriate device with which to describe her findings, and introduced an additional category: the status of the language for the interpreter (A or B language). The next section offers a brief outline of Dam’s (2004a) study.

1.2 Dam’s study on language choice in note-taking

Dam conducted a small-scale empirical study (2004a) with student interpreters near the end of their interpreting course in an effort to establish which of their working languages (Danish or Spanish) they preferred when taking notes. She made recordings of four student interpreters enrolled in the EMCI course at the Copenhagen Business School as they consecutively interpreted a Spanish text into Danish and a Danish text into Spanish. Their training had primarily been conducted in accordance with the principles advocated by Rozan (1956), but the individual character of note-taking had also been emphasized during the course. The question of language choice had been a topic of discussion in class, but the teachers did not specifically recommend the use of a certain working language. Three of the four students had Danish A and Spanish B, while the fourth had Spanish A and Danish B.

Dam’s analysis of the recorded data revealed that the three subjects with Danish A took the vast majority (81%, 74% and 78%) of their notes in their TL (Danish), confirming TL dominance in note-taking, whereas the subject with Spanish A produced the opposite pattern. This calls into question the predominance of the TL. Dam then tried to identify another common denomina-
tor in the subjects’ performance and employed the new categories of A and B languages. Her data indicated that the students wrote most of their notes in their A language, and Dam therefore concluded that the note-taking preference correlated more strongly with the status of the language for the interpreter (A or B language) as opposed to the status of the language in the task (SL vs. TL). The pattern found in the task from Spanish into Danish was corroborated by the results of the task from Danish into Spanish, where the first three subjects took practically no notes in their TL. A large percentage of the notes taken by subjects 1, 2 and 3 (82%, 77% and 86%, respectively) were jotted down in the SL (Danish), in contrast with subject 4, who produced the bulk of the notes (87%) in the SL (Spanish) and only 2% in the TL, Danish. Dam again suggested that the decisive factor in the interpreters’ choice of language in the notes may be their preference for their A language over their B or C language.

The present paper will test to what extent Dam’s novel approach is relevant and useful for languages other than Danish and Spanish, through an empirical study very similar in setting, circumstances and subjects to Dam’s.

2. Method

2.1 Subjects and data

The eight subjects in the present study were student trainees completing the second year of their EMCI course with a Hungarian-English language combination. The method applied was very similar to Dam’s (2004a), with the exception of one essential parameter: One of the students participating in Dam’s study had Spanish A and three had Spanish B, whereas all eight of our subjects had Hungarian A and English B.

The data came from sixteen (i.e. two times eight) sets of notes, half of which were produced at the EMCI examination at ELTE University in Budapest in 2000 by student trainees at the end of their two-year course; the other half were taken in an ordinary classroom setting a year later when students were preparing for their EMCI examination at the same university.

Four different source texts were used: two in English and two in Hungarian. Each text was interpreted by two successive candidates at the examination, and the same procedure was repeated with trainees preparing for their examination the following year. Accordingly, the present study will look at four source texts interpreted by four different subjects, i.e. a total of 16 different renditions plus 16 sets of notes produced by the eight subjects.
Unfortunately, the speakers present at the 2000 examination were not available a year later, and therefore the second group of students interpreted the audio recordings of the speeches delivered the year before. The two settings were quite different for two reasons: (a) subjects 1–4 were under stress from the fact that they were taking an examination, and (b) subjects 5–8 did not have a view of the speakers. Overall, however, we believe that the circumstances of the two sets of performances were sufficiently similar to allow for comparison.

The topics covered a wider range than Dam’s source texts. The examination setting meant that a maximum of two identical source texts could be delivered to two successive candidates to make sure that equal and fair conditions were guaranteed for each candidate. The English→Hungarian source text delivered to subjects 1 and 2 concerned tulip bulbs in seventeenth-century Holland, the text for subjects 3 and 4 was about the dangers of smoking. Subjects 5 and 6 also interpreted the text on tulip bulbs, and subjects 7 and 8 the one on smoking. The Hungarian→English source text delivered to subjects 1 and 2 (and later 5 and 6) related to Hungary’s student-loan scheme; subjects 3 and 4 (and later subjects 7 and 8) interpreted a text on a productivity fund.

Similarly to the Danish subjects studied by Dam (2004a), these students were trained on the basis of the principles presented in Rozan (1956), but their notes clearly reflect the individual and distinctive nature of their techniques. Like Dam’s subjects, these students had also occasionally discussed the language of note-taking, but had not been given any specific instructions as to what language they should favour when taking notes. All subjects were student trainees with Hungarian A and English B, although subjects 3 and 4 had German B as well, a rarity in the Hungarian conference interpreters’ community. Since no students on the EMCI course had English A, the subjects were chosen on the basis of their B language(s).

It is important to highlight the fact that the students selected as subjects for this study were more experienced than typical student trainees. The reason for this is rather trivial: 2000 was the first year Hungarians were able to enrol for an EMCI course, and thus most of those taking the course were over 30 years of age (average 33 years) and had already gained considerable interpreting experience (3.5 years on average). Most of these “quasi professionals” decided to take the EMCI course to obtain a degree in conference interpreting and thus demonstrate their interpreting skills. All eight subjects had worked at international conferences in both the consecutive and the simultaneous modes. In fact, two currently work at the Interpreting Service of the European Parliament and four others currently teach interpreting at a university.
2.2 Evaluations and questionnaires

In an attempt to triangulate our findings, we both carried out a quantitative analysis of the notes (see below) and looked at the subjects’ own perceptions as elicited by questionnaires. Three different questionnaires were distributed among the subjects, seeking information about three parameters, one of which concerned language choice: they were asked (a) what language they used in the course of their note-taking during the experiment, (b) how they usually took notes (SL or TL? A or B language? English or Hungarian?), and (c) what they judged to be the governing force in their note-taking in terms of language choice.

3. Results

3.1 Grouping the data

With a view to a quantitative analysis, we first had to establish how to best categorize the data. Thus, we scrutinized the categories employed in Dam (2004a) to determine whether they were appropriate for the English/Hungarian language combination. Dam first counted all the note units each subject wrote, including words, abbreviations and symbols. She then extracted the clearly identifiable language-based units and counted how many were in the TL or in the SL and how many were in the subject’s A or B language. She also made a separate category for any third language used in the notes, and introduced another group for notes in a non-identifiable language, with emphasis on forms that would be the same in the SL, the TL (such as partner, profit or internet) or any third language (e.g. proper names). We employ the same categories, except for “third language” and “non-identifiable language”: the latter two groups will be presented as one category under the label “?” primarily because notes in a third language generally represented less than 1% of total notes.

The following section will describe the tasks and results in detail, with the English→Hungarian text on tulip bulbs labelled task 1, the English→Hungarian speech on smoking task 2, the Hungarian→English student-loan-scheme text labelled task 3 and the Hungarian→English productivity-fund speech labelled task 4. All four source texts lasted for approximately five minutes, delivered at a speed of about 100 words per minute.

We first compare our findings with Dam’s (choice of SL vs. TL and choice of A vs. B language). Tables 1 and 2 show the results for tasks 1 and 2.
3.2 Choice of source language vs. target language

The results of tasks 1 and 2 are quite varied. Four (i.e. half) of the subjects (1, 3, 5 and 6) wrote the vast majority of their notes in the SL, while three (2, 4 and 8) employed a more balanced mix of SL and TL, and one (7) preferred to take notes in the TL. This seems to be at considerable variance with the data found in Dam’s Table 1, where all the subjects showed a preference for the TL. However, when we consider the notes produced for the interpreting in the other direction, i.e. in tasks 3 and 4, a completely different pattern emerges. The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

With a single exception (subject 1), all of the subjects took the majority of their notes in the TL, a significant deviation from the results in Tables 1 and 2, where only one subject (7) took notes in the TL.3 Here, however, only three subjects demonstrated a marked preference for the TL (subjects 5, 6 and 7), and most of the subjects wrote roughly two-thirds of their notes in the TL. In other words, with the exception of subject 1, who applied a rather balanced mixture of SL and TL, none of the subjects made the majority of their notes in the SL, which was their stronger (A) language.

The question naturally arises as to why there are such noticeable differences between the two performances by the same subjects. Subject 5, for instance, who wrote 95% of the notes in the SL in task 1 and 96% in the TL in task 3, is a case in point. We might assume that this subject wrote her notes in her stronger language, Hungarian. But this is obviously not the case, as we shall see once we

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Table 1. SL/TL distribution of languages of notes; task 1 (English→Hungarian)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subject 1</th>
<th>Subject 2</th>
<th>Subject 5</th>
<th>Subject 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Units (total)</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lg.-based units</td>
<td>115 (48%)</td>
<td>108 (61%)</td>
<td>165 (68%)</td>
<td>139 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL (English)</td>
<td>100 (87%)</td>
<td>44 (41%)</td>
<td>157 (95%)</td>
<td>123 (88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL (Hungarian)</td>
<td>7 (6%)</td>
<td>57 (53%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>8 (7%)</td>
<td>7 (6%)</td>
<td>8 (5%)</td>
<td>8 (6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. SL/TL distribution of languages of notes; task 2 (English→Hungarian)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subject 3</th>
<th>Subject 4</th>
<th>Subject 7</th>
<th>Subject 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Units (total)</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lg.-based units</td>
<td>142 (63%)</td>
<td>127 (64%)</td>
<td>90 (73%)</td>
<td>140 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL (English)</td>
<td>115 (81%)</td>
<td>69 (54%)</td>
<td>15 (17%)</td>
<td>56 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL (Hungarian)</td>
<td>25 (18%)</td>
<td>54 (43%)</td>
<td>67 (74%)</td>
<td>76 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
<td>8 (9%)</td>
<td>8 (6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
have reorganized Tables 1–4, and introduced A and B languages instead of SL and TL.

3.3 Choice of A vs. B language

This section addresses the same issue from a different angle, asking whether the subjects’ preference for their A language over their B language may be involved in their choice of note-taking language, as Dam suggests. Tables 5 and 6 present a different representation of the same results, but with the focus on the status of the language in the interpreter’s language combination.

Table 3. SL/TL distribution of languages of notes; task 3 (Hungarian→English)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject 1</th>
<th>Subject 2</th>
<th>Subject 5</th>
<th>Subject 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Units (total)</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lg.-based units</td>
<td>104 (51%)</td>
<td>115 (57%)</td>
<td>141 (69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL (Hungarian)</td>
<td>55 (33%)</td>
<td>42 (37%)</td>
<td>5 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL (English)</td>
<td>48 (46%)</td>
<td>70 (61%)</td>
<td>136 (96%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>5 (1%)</td>
<td>3 (2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. SL/TL distribution of languages of notes; task 4 (Hungarian→English)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject 3</th>
<th>Subject 4</th>
<th>Subject 7</th>
<th>Subject 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Units (total)</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lg.-based units</td>
<td>122 (54%)</td>
<td>120 (70%)</td>
<td>96 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL (Hungarian)</td>
<td>42 (35%)</td>
<td>25 (21%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL (English)</td>
<td>65 (53%)</td>
<td>82 (68%)</td>
<td>79 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>15 (12%)</td>
<td>13 (11%)</td>
<td>17 (18%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Distribution of languages of notes (in percent) by subjects 1–8 working from their B into their A language (tasks 1 and 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S 1</th>
<th>S 2</th>
<th>S 3</th>
<th>S 4</th>
<th>S 5</th>
<th>S 6</th>
<th>S 7</th>
<th>S 8</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A = TL (HUN)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B = SL (ENG)</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Distribution of languages of notes (in percent) by subjects 1–8 working from their A into their B language (tasks 3 and 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S 1</th>
<th>S 2</th>
<th>S 3</th>
<th>S 4</th>
<th>S 5</th>
<th>S 6</th>
<th>S 7</th>
<th>S 8</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A = SL (HUN)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B = TL (ENG)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is quite clear from Tables 5 and 6 that overall the subjects take more notes in their B language than in their A language, which does not corroborate Dam’s results. This preference for the B language applies regardless of whether B happens to be the SL or the TL. We acknowledge that Dam’s subjects displayed a wider gap between the percentage of notes they made in their A as opposed to their B language (an average of 80% in their A and 4% in their B language when working from B into A, and 80% and 0.75% when working from A into B). In contrast, a very high percentage of our subjects show a preference for the use of their B language in more or less the same magnitude, almost 63%, when interpreting from B into A, and almost 70% when working from A into B.

3.4 Choice of English over Hungarian

In the previous section, it was established that the majority of the subjects revealed a marked tendency to prefer their B language over their A language. This discovery is in line with Dam’s (2004: 12) proposition that “the choice of language in note-taking seems to be governed mainly by the status of the language in the interpreters’ language combination”; the present findings, however, point to a preference in the opposite direction. Possibly, the key to the extreme differences in the data lies in the languages featured in the two studies.

Dam examined interpreting between Danish and Spanish, with three of her subjects having Danish A and one Danish B. In the present study, all eight subjects have Hungarian A and English B. Table 7 highlights how many of the subjects preferred to use English in the two directions when taking notes.

The data in Tables 5, 6 and 7 seem to demonstrate that our subjects had a preference for English in both directions. While only five of the eight subjects made more notes in English in tasks 1 and 2 (English→Hungarian), in tasks 3 and 4 (Hungarian→English) seven subjects wrote more notes in their B language. The preference for English is even more pronounced when we look at the means of the percentages produced by the eight subjects. The most striking discrepancy, perhaps, between the results produced by Dam’s subjects and ours relates to interpreting from A into B: while seven out of the eight subjects with Hungarian A made more notes in their B language, none of Dam’s subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7. Percentage of the subjects’ notes in English</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English→Hungarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian→English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with Danish A took more notes in B; in fact, they did not take a single note in their B language when working into B.

Notwithstanding the Hungarian subjects’ inclination towards English in both directions, their preference for either the SL or the TL can also be captured in their notes, indicating that the SL/TL category may also be relevant. As we can see in Tables 1 to 7, subject 1 prefers the SL; subjects 2, 7 and 8 favour the TL; and subjects 3, 4, 5 and 6 prefer English, regardless of whether English is the SL or the TL. This means that four of the subjects (50%) prefer English, but the language choice of the remaining four (50%) seems to be governed by the traditional categories of SL and TL.

The data from the questionnaires with regard to preference for the SL or the TL seems to confirm the results revealed in the notes. In the questionnaire, subject 1 stressed that she always takes notes in English, regardless of the language of the original, even when working with her C language, French, but her notes do not seem to justify her assertion. While subjects 2, 7 and 8 did take notes in the TL, as indicated in their replies, subject 4 did not: he took most of his notes in English, irrespective of the direction of interpreting. Interestingly, subjects 3 and 6 also described themselves as being SL-oriented, but turned out to be English-driven, and only subject 5 stressed and demonstrated her partiality towards English in both directions. Thus, we can draw another tentative conclusion from the comparison of quantitative and qualitative results: only half of the subjects seem to be aware of their choice regarding the SL or the TL. This seems to suggest that the SL/TL parameter is a relevant category in determining the interpreters’ language choice, although it also seems that the nature of the languages in the interpreter’s combination may be just as essential, an idea further discussed below.

3.5 The issue of note-taking economy

One of the most important findings from the questionnaire regarding language choice was that six of the eight subjects pointed out the usefulness of English because “it is more compact”, “it is short and simple” or “it is easier to abbreviate”. Numerous English words are indeed shorter and thus more economical than their Hungarian equivalents (e.g. *tulip/tulipán, trade/kereskedelem, florist/virágárus, smoking/dohányzás, survey/felmérés*). There are obviously counter-examples (*price/ár, market/piac, capital/tőke*, etc.), but internationally used abbreviations, and especially acronyms based on English, may be so tempting that the interpreter eventually resorts to taking notes in English.
Compactness and simplicity may indeed be factors, but are they captured in the notes? Below we present the notes of subject 4, who had more English-language notes than he himself had expected. His notes contain instances where simplicity or compactness were clearly the key to language choice.

Subject 4 (Task 2):

1) Source text: an advertising campaign set up by the British government a few years ago
   Notes: adv. camp / by UK Gov. néhány éve
   [by UK Gov. would be “a Brit kormány által” in Hungarian]

2) Source text: This might go some way towards explaining why they are reluctant to ban smoking altogether
   Notes: Ezért nem akarják ban teljesen
   [ban would be “betiltani” in Hungarian]

3) Source text: So is the two… minutes or so worth of pleasure, in inverted commas “pleasure” that you get from a cigarette really worth living eleven minutes shorter for?
   Notes: megéri 2 perc élvezet 11 perc loss
   [“megéri” means worth in English, and “élvezet” joy; “perc” is minutes, whereas loss would be “veszteség” in Hungarian]

4) Source text: it’s important for the public to be properly informed
   Notes: kell public prop informed
   [“kell” means need to or must in English]

The fragment *public prop. informed* would have been much longer in Hungarian, even had the subject chopped inflections and used a similar type of abbreviation: *közvélemény megf. tájékoztatás*. No wonder that subject 4 abandoned the general principle of taking notes in the TL (Hungarian) and opted for English. On the other hand, short and snappy Hungarian items may also be economical, e.g. perc (minute), or kell (must be).

The fact that short English items find their way into the Hungarian linguistic environment can be demonstrated via several other examples; and such examples are indeed abundant in the corpus. The word *trade* (meaning *kereskedelem* in Hungarian) appears everywhere, irrespective of the language of the source text. Words which are far more economical to record than their Hungarian equivalents include items such as *needy* (rászoruló), *just* (igazságos), *equal* (egyenlő), *course* (tanfolyam), *overseas* (tengerentúli) and *subsidies* (állami támogatás). In several instances, an abbreviation developed to denote
the given term is used in both directions (e.g. ‘ed’ or ‘edu’ to denote education (in Hungarian, oktatás), ‘gov’ or ‘gover’ to denote government (in Hungarian, kormány), ‘intro’ to denote introduce (bevezet), or ‘inv’ to denote investment (befektetés)).

For further evidence of the use of English as a “tool of economy” during note-taking, we should examine the data for the distribution of full words as well as the ratio of English to Hungarian items among full words. Interestingly, our results are very similar to those reported by Dam (2004b), who studied the choice of form in professional interpreters’ notes: subjects in both studies showed a preference for full words (35% and 45%, respectively), while the use of symbols ranked second in both experiments (41% and 39%, respectively), and abbreviations third (25% and 16%, respectively).  

We found that overall the subjects used more full words in English than in Hungarian: 60% of the full words were in English (37% in Hungarian and 3% in a third language) when the SL was English, and 71% of the notes were English (26% in Hungarian and 3% in a third language) when the TL was English.

4. Discussion

The present study has so far taken a closer look at two parameters offered in the interpreting literature as concerns the choice of language in note-taking, i.e. the choice of SL or TL on the one hand and of A or B language on the other. The paper has also drawn attention to a third parameter, the nature of the languages in the interpreter’s language combination, which may also play an essential role in language choice.

Dam argues that A vs. B language is the governing factor in the choice of language in note-taking and sees Gile’s (1995) Effort Model of consecutive interpreting as a plausible theoretical explanation for this. The basis of her argument is that “interpreters are likely to take notes in whichever language is easier and therefore faster” (Dam 2004a: 13) in order to minimize their efforts of listening to and analysing the incoming speech. Finding further support in Matyssek (1989), she goes on to propose that “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” (2004a: 13) because of the differences in mastery of the languages. Dam does not rule out the value of the SL/TL parameter when pointing out that taking notes in the SL seems to be theoretically easier/faster, as the interpreter has the choice of writing down the source text verbatim, and is not required to undertake the laborious task of code-switching. Dam
(backed up by Gile) is certainly correct in suggesting that it is perhaps easier simply to write down what we hear and not bother with continuously switching codes (now disregarding other obvious advantages of SL over TL note-taking). Even so, it is interesting to note that none of our subjects claimed to take notes in their A language because they consider it easier or more natural to do so or because they have greater mastery of A. Similar to Dam’s subjects, they did admit to relying on their A language when a B-language equivalent did not immediately spring to mind, or when the Hungarian source text proved to be too difficult to grasp.

The crucial question is: What makes one language easier and/or faster than the other? When we compare English and Hungarian, for example, we see that English has much shorter linguistic units, is much easier to abbreviate, and possesses a good number of internationally accepted contractions and acronyms, as pointed out by the subjects in this study. It is very difficult to document the above claim that Hungarian words are longer on average than English ones, although translations from English into Hungarian are generally reported to have 35% more characters than translations from Hungarian into English (see www.szablya.com). Hungarian words are also prone to be longer for one significant reason: it is an agglutinative language so that prefixes and suffixes are attached to the words.

In a recent study (Németh et al. in press), a group of Hungarian psychologists and linguists researched the relationship between verbal working memory and the morphological complexity of words. The authors conducted three word-recall experiments, based on classical span design, and their results indicated that morphological complexity did have a significant impact on word span, and thus on word recall. Németh et al. highlight that the more morphologically complex a word is, the more arduous it is to retain it in one’s working memory. Their results also suggest that derivatives and inflected words are more difficult to recall from short-term memory than stems because access to the mental lexicon is more difficult with derivatives and inflected words, and hence more mental effort is required.

This may explain why Hungarian subjects are likely to opt for English, regardless of whether it functions as the SL or as the TL. We could perhaps get a clearer picture and a more solid basis for comparison if we conducted analogous experiments with the combinations Danish-English and Spanish-English as well. It might also be interesting to look at other language pairs (Indo-European vs. non-Indo-European ones) as the differences may be larger than between two Indo-European languages (also pointed out by Kondo in Tommola (1997: 73) in the case of Japanese).
Another study could explore the relationship between word economy and performance quality, i.e. if subjects applying a larger number of short units can take more notes and therefore work more efficiently.

The fact that English is morphologically less complex and is more economical when taking notes may explain why it is so popular among Hungarian note-takers, but there is another important factor that deserves mention. Often labelled as an exotic language in the European Union (along with the other two Finno-Ugrian EU languages, Finnish and Estonian), even by professional interpreters, Hungarian is one of the tongues that very few people would venture to learn as a second (third, fourth, etc.) foreign language. And since there are not many L2 speakers of Hungarian in the interpreting community, interpreters with Hungarian as mother tongue are required to work into their B language more often than employers would find desirable. Since EMCI students are required to comply with the very high requirements for interpreting at all European institutions, subjects must have a very strong B language, practically equivalent in standard with their A language. Accordingly, as a means of avoiding Hungarian, a language renowned for very long words, numerous (time-consuming) diacritical marks above vowels and clumsy options for abbreviation, the use of English may prove very convenient for note-taking during longer consecutive speeches. It would be of great interest to know whether similar results would emerge from a comparable study with a Finnish-English combination. As another Finno-Ugrian language, Finnish has very similar linguistic features to Hungarian; Finnish is also rarely found as a C language among interpreters working at the various EU institutions, which implies that many Finnish L1 speakers must work into their B language.

Apart from the issue of note-taking economy and the fact that the Hungarian subjects in this study (and Hungarian interpreters in general) are required to have a strong B language and hence have a very fine command of English, there might be another explanation for their extensive use of English-language notes. Several subjects mentioned in the questionnaire that they tend to take notes in English simply because they were trained in English. This is a logical explanation; after all there are quite a number of books on the market that offer very practical suggestions in English on how to take notes (Bowen & Bowen 1980; Allioni 1989; Jones 1998; Gillies 2001; Szabó 2003), and even Rozan’s (1956) classic was republished in English in 2003 by the Polish academic publishing company Tertium. At the same time, very little has been written in Hungarian on the subject, with the notable exception of Láng (2002). Admittedly, German books and papers are available and provide excellent advice,
particularly on the use of symbols (e.g. Becker 1979; Matyssek 1989; Ahrens 2002; Andres 2002).

These proposed explanations receive support from the subjects of this study. Subject 1, for instance, finds that English is useful as a note-taking tool even when it is not one of the languages in her current language pair. As she put it:

*I usually take notes in English regardless of the language of the original. Even when I am working with French I often take notes in E. I think that this is because I was trained in English.*

A few subjects mentioned that English might even be considered to be an “intermediary tool” between two codes (languages), and may be viewed as a kind of go-between language in the consecutive mode. It would be interesting to perform a study to establish how many subjects in a randomly selected group of professional interpreters would acknowledge using English as an intermediary language when working in real-life situations. This idea has clearly occurred to Subject 7 (who, incidentally, prefers to take notes in the TL):

*The idea that someone would take notes in English while working between two other languages strikes me as bizarre. I could only explain it by speculating that they might be using English as a “sign-language”, a true intermediary rather than a real language. This might be related to the fact that note-taking with its symbols, often involving abbreviations, is usually taught in English, so interpreters internalise those abbreviations rather than create their own. In that sense English might work as a set of symbols, denoting concepts, rather than actual words.*

Evidently, to label English used for note-taking purposes as an appropriately functioning liaison between two other languages might be too strong an argument to put forward. Nevertheless, this speculation might offer food for thought for further research in the fields of both note-taking and interpreter training.

5. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the choice of language in interpreters’ notes on the basis of two approaches presently available in the literature: the TL vs. SL parameter and the A language vs. B language concept. Analysis of the data demonstrates that the nature of the interpreter’s language pair, i.e. the combination itself, may be just as important.
I must stress that both the SL vs. TL and the A vs. B language parameters play key roles in the interpreter’s choice of note-taking language, and it is undeniable that some subjects base their choice on these distinctions. Several subjects in the present study indicated in their responses to the questionnaire that they always take notes in the TL, and, even if this claim sometimes proves fallacious, they at least intend to take notes in the TL. It is beyond doubt that most interpreters have a better mastery of their A language or first language, and when a speech is of great lexical difficulty, it may be quicker and safer to rely on the mother tongue.

The conclusion that the language combination itself might be important can only serve as an introduction to further studies on the issue. We acknowledge that all of our subjects were students and that no professional interpreters took part. Secondly, the data were collected in a non-authentic setting, though clearly an examination situation can create at least as much stress as an authentic interpreting assignment. Two of the greatest challenges faced by researchers in the field of interpreting are “to find authentic speeches and enlisting the cooperation of professional interpreters for research purposes” (Gile 2001: 14). Ideally we would have had more participants and included the analysis of another language combination to establish whether students with, say, German B take as many notes in German as the observed students with English B. It is to be hoped that a venturesome researcher will soon find the time and means to conduct a similar study with another language combination and either lend support to or question the present conclusions.

Notes

1. This book, written in Hungarian, discusses various aspects of conference interpreting with special emphasis on training, the introduction of students to the art of interpreting and the improvement of memory and note-taking skills. The volume devotes two long chapters to the teaching of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, including hands-on activities, strategic advice and evaluation aspects.

2. A number of MA theses and a few PhD dissertations are written each year on the topic of consecutive interpreting (most not published), as listed on the CIRIN homepage: http://perso.wanadoo.fr/daniel.gile/.

3. This finding seems to support Dam’s suggestion that TL orientation is task-related.

4. Further abbreviating *közvélemény* (i.e. *közv*) would confuse the interpreter as *közv* might mean either közvetlen (direct) or közvetítő (mediator).
5. It must be stressed that Dam (2004b) is based on the performances of professional interpreters.

6. While international organisations did not generally have interpreters working into their B language, the Interpreting Service of the EU Commission (SCIC) made it clear in a Memorandum (2002) that relay interpreting will be unavoidable with the growing number of member countries, which entails interpreting into one’s B language.

7. With the enlargement of the EU on 1 May 2004 several other exotic languages became official EU languages, including Estonian (also a Finno-Ugrian language), Slovakian, Latvian, etc. Since all the official languages cannot possibly be covered in one booth, the role of pivots and relay interpreting has grown considerably.

References


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