



Strategies in Real Time: Unconscious Strategy Use in Consecutive Interpreting

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Abstract. This article investigates the largely unconscious use of interpretative strategies in consecutive interpreting within high level diplomatic settings, drawing on the author's experience as a language consultant in the Nigeria–China strategic partnership. Grounded in equivalence-based translation theory and the Interpretive Theory of Translation, it conceptualizes consecutive interpreting as a real time, sense-oriented process comprising comprehension, de verbalization, and reformulation, in which interpreters rely on cognitive representations rather than surface linguistic forms. Adopting Li's (2015) taxonomy of knowledge, language, meaning and delivery-based strategies, the study identifies how anticipation, paraphrasing, compression, omission, text expansion, and other techniques are mobilised, often implicitly, to manage cognitive load and communicative goals alongside core note taking principles of economy, instantaneous seizability, and individuality. The discussion further examines practical challenges—time management, abbreviations, uniformity of reaction, professional jargon, numbering systems, and shifts between professional and casual registers—and illustrates how these factors affect message fidelity and rapport in diplomatic encounters. The article argues that while many strategies emerge from deep seated linguistic competence and situational awareness rather than explicit training, systematically foregrounding strategy awareness and sense-oriented processing in interpreter education can enhance accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and communicative effectiveness in complex cross-cultural negotiations.

Keywords: Interpretation, Consecutive Interpretation, Strategies, Time Management;

1. Introduction

Catford (1965) defines translation as the replacement of textual material in one language (source language SL) by equivalent textual material in another language

(target language TL). Sager (1993) points out that this definition is centred around the importance of maintaining some kind of 'equivalence' between SL and TL. Nida and Taber (1982) translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.

More recently, translation has been defined as a "re-contextualisation" process that reconstructs the source text within a new linguistic and cultural framework (House 2021). Interpretation on the other hand, is studied as a distinct discipline focusing on auditory processing, memory retention, and real-time linguistic decision-making. Interpreting is an oral rendition in the target language of an oral message in the source language (Dollerup et.al., 2015).

Interpretation and translation are distinct yet closely related language transfer processes, differentiated primarily by their medium—spoken versus written—and their cognitive and temporal demands. Interpretation refers to the immediate, oral rendition of spoken language from a source to a target language, typically performed in real time during conversations, conferences, or legal proceedings. There are mainly two types of interpretation: (a) consecutive interpreting, in which the interlingua transmission takes place after the 'whole' text has been delivered in the source language, and (b) simultaneous interpreting, in which the target language rendition takes place at the same time as the delivery of the 'original message' in the source language (Dollerup et.al., 2015). The form of interpretation referred to in this work is consecutive interpretation. The data used and experience cited in this work are those of the language consultant with the Nigerian presidency in the Nigeria- China strategic partnership, during a year-long interpretation in high end meetings and diplomatic negotiation. All examples used in the work are references from real consecutive translation done

during the course of the job as a consultant. The research addresses the unconscious use of interpretative strategies, while the other strategies mentioned are the essential strategies that help with challenges faced during consecutive interpretation.

2. Theoretical Framework

This work used the Interpretive Theory of Translation developed by Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer. Interpretive theory, or the Interpretive Theory of Translation, was developed by Danica Seleskovitch and later elaborated by Marianne Lederer at the *École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT)* in Paris (Seleskovitch, 1975/1978; Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984). This theory views translation and interpreting as a sense oriented, three phase process comprising comprehension, de verbalization, and reformulation, in which the message is first understood in context, then detached from the surface form of the source language into a language neutral mental representation, and finally expressed naturally in the target language (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984; Lederer, 1994). The model emphasizes that language is a vehicle of meaning and that true equivalence lies at the level of cognitive content rather than at the level of verbal structure (Seleskovitch, 1977; Lederer, 1994).

In this work, interpretive theory is adopted to frame consecutive interpreting as a real time, meaning driven process in which the interpreter grasps the sense of the source language message, stores it in a cognitive representation, and then renders it in the target language without merely reproducing source language forms. The discussion of strategies such as anticipation, paraphrasing, text expansion, and omission aligns with the interpretive emphasis on de verbalization and re formulation, positioning them as manifestations of sense-oriented processing rather than as deviations from the source text (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984; Lederer, 2003). By linking phenomena such as abbreviation handling, uniformity of reaction, and numbering systems to cognitive sense reconstruction, this work situates empirical data within the interpretive framework and proposes that interpreter training should foreground this sense-oriented perspective rather than purely formal equivalence. The analysis also connects the theory to note taking, showing how notes function as prompts for sense rather than verbatim records, reflecting the language neutral or meaning oriented approach central to the interpretive model.

3. Consecutive Interpretation

Consecutive interpretation is usually used in business meetings, formal dinners and formal occasions. Consecutive interpretation involves languages that are inherently termed “planned” or “unplanned” discourse (Ochs 1979). Planned discourse refers discourse that is thought out and organized, usually a written speech or read manuscript while unplanned discourse is not forethought or organized mainly freestyle conversations.

In interpretation, unlike translation where task involves writing, encoding and decoding, all of which are carried out separately—interpretation processes are carried out in the same space and time. The process involved in interpretation includes deliver, rendition and reception that is the speaker’s delivery, the interpreter’s rendition and the listener’s reception all present at the same time. This gives no room for review, editing or hesitation, and the interpreter is saddle with the responsibility of relying solely on linguistic skills and knowledge of the language. However, interpreters make use of strategies to help ease the task. These strategies make it easier for researchers to describe the process of interpreting, and reveal the decisions made in a given situation to reach a communicative goal (Riccardi 2005: 753). Kader and Seubert (2015) argue that interpreting strategies should be an important component of interpreter training because the cognitive constraints imposed by the interpreting task require the use of strategies to solve or avoid problems in comprehension and production.

Li (2015) categorized the 27 strategies used during interpretation into four groups- knowledge-based strategies, language-based strategies, meaning-based strategies, delivery-based strategies. Regarding the strategies, Li noted that they are deliberate, can be applied consciously and multiple strategies can be used at the same time by interpreters and can ultimately have effect on the message being conveyed. This implies that strategies already known or learned by an interpreter so much so that it becomes an unconscious act. However, this work posits that even without prior knowledge of the strategies, an interpreter can equally unconsciously make use of the strategies. Moreover, citing from experience, the aforementioned strategies alone is not, by themselves alone, enough to enable a successful interpretation process. It needs to be in addition to other techniques like note-taking and a mastery of the 3-phase process of interpretation.

The strategies listed for consecutive interpretation includes: Anticipation, Compression, Omission/ellipsis, Text expansion, Stalling, Approximation, Paraphrasing, Morpho-syntactic transformation, Décalage, Transcodage, Parallel reformulation, Restructuring, Inference, Repair, Evasion, Visualization, No repair, Reproduction, Transfer, Resorting to world knowledge, adaptation, Personal involvement, Monitoring, Repetition, Pause distribution, Intonation. Only Chunking/segmentation is not grouped for consecutive translation.

While some of the strategies are overlapping and redundant, and some are very relevant. In retrospect, all the relevant strategies were used during the language consultancy. However, some were used in variation from the original. Anticipation for example was mostly used in two forms- Pre-interpretation and During-interpretation anticipation. The pre-interpretation anticipation is carried out when the interpreter knows and is able to gather information about the event to take place. Some of the information includes name, professions of the parties involved as well as the theme of discourse. The interpreter will then be able to anticipate the jargon and key words that will most probably be used during the work. For instance, if interpretation is to take place between an electricity generation company and a government agency, the interpreter can anticipate the use of words like kilowatt, electricity generation, distribution. During interpretation, lexical collocation or set phrases can also be anticipated.

Omission is an important strategy often used to truncate interpretation difficulties, eliminate redundancy, and remove unimportant utterances, repetitions and superfluous expressions. Li (2015) argues that omission can also be used for untranslatable or unacceptable expressions. However, in real life consecutive translation nothing can be treated as “untranslatable”, since the interpreter has all participants at the table waiting to hear the translated version of the speech. Therefore, a consecutive interpreter (CI) cannot declare an expression untranslatable during interpretation. What was mostly done instead is to add an additional explanation to convey the SL meaning into the TL. In such situation, Text expansion should be employed rather than omission.

Morpho-syntactic transformation and décalage was not used as a strategy, but as skills possess professional interpretation. Décalage entails the narrowing of the ear-voice-span while Morpho-syntactic transformation involves expressing a meaning using the syntactic structure different from that of the SL. A

CI should have a good knowledge of the morphological and syntactic structure of both the Target and Source Languages; morpho-syntactic transformation from SL to TL occur naturally. Wikan .H (2019) states that an interpreter is required to have good listening skills, extensive knowledge, a good understanding of meaning, strong language skills in both source language and target language, and the ability to articulate speech clearly. All skills possessed commencement of interpretation.

Visualization, as described by Jones (2002) , is referred to as a knowledge-based technique, it involves a mental imagery of the source language content for comprehension in descriptive messages. While this can be considered a useful technique for assimilation, it cannot readily be treated as a strategy for interpretation. An interpreter, in addition to having language skills, should be fluent in both SL and TL. Therefore, if the interpreter does not rely on visualization in everyday language use, it is unlikely that the skill would be needed during interpretation. Morpho-syntactic transformation, Décalage and Visualization all fall within the fundamental knowledge and skill base expected of a CI before they take on the job, which indicates that they should not be strategies that help an interpreter navigate a difficult position.

There are three phase process taken during interpretation: understanding the source language speech, de verbalizing key points into a mental schema, and then reformulating the message in the target language with necessary adjustments for clarity. Morpho-syntactic transformation, Décalage and Visualization all belong to the first phase and second phase, which if not successful, an interpreter cannot proceed to the third phase. The first two phases can be achieved without a formal training, by a novice during interpretation, however the third phase mostly needs a more refined knowledge of the TL.

During the consultancy role as a novice on the various interpretation strategies, there were constant use of the strategies stated unconsciously. It is, therefore, argued that interpreters often rely on strategies that correspond to the aforementioned. However, in addition to the aforementioned strategies there is one strategy that is of significant importance in achieving phase two of the delivery process in interpretation-- Note-taking.

4. Note-taking

Note-taking is a critical skill used in consecutive interpreting to help keep track of information. It functions as a kind of supporting technique, developed

by practitioners for practitioners, to aid the retrieval of part of the source text understanding from memory (Kohn, et al 2021). Note-taking also involves its own set of techniques used during the act of interpretation. Due to time sensitive nature of the Consecutive interpreter's work, practitioners generally apply certain strategies in note-taking, commonly referred to as principles (Kurt et al. 2021): The principle of economy, instantaneous seizability, and individuality. The principle of economy ensures minimal effort in notation allowing notes to be as sparse and brief as possible. Because of limited time available for notations, CIs employ this principle and write as briefly and as little as time permits. Instantaneous seizability requires that the interpreter be able to instantaneously read the note at a glance, so as to retrace the line of thought. This helps relieve the strain on memory and enables the interpreter to recall key points instantly. The principle of Individuality iterates that note-taking has no obligatory rule. It is entirely dependent on the interpreter's personal ability and training.

When discussing of Note-taking, two prominent arguments can be identified: the Text-as-Object approach (Seleskovitch & ledeere 1989) and the Language-neutral approach (Matyssek 1989). The Text-As-Object approach refer to note-taking annotates the SL's text meaning as a de-verbalised entity, since successful interpretation depends on an extensive comprehension of the SL text. Language-neutral approach argues that an interpreter's note should be language-neutral devoid of features from both languages, in order to detach from SL's surface structure. In reality, note-taking is highly dependent on the individuality principle; therefore, in most cases, the language-neutral approach is difficult to apply.

Appendix A presents a real notation of a consecutive interpretation. It records an hour-long consecutive interpretation from Chinese to English and vice-versa in a formal setting. Unlike the language-neutral approach, the notation contains words from both languages involved. It conforms with all three principles of note-taking. There are no full sentences in the note, which reflects the limitation of time and the necessity for economy of words. The notation will not be comprehensible to anyone else except the interpreter; by "comprehensibility" it implies the ability to understand the contexts in which they used and to explain the points associated with the economized words. This aligns with the principle of Instantaneous seizability and individuality. It is apparent that both languages- Chinese and English- are reflected in the notation.

Despite the accurate use of strategies, whether consciously or unconsciously, there are significant aspects of interpretation and language use that still pose a considerable number of obstacles in consecutive interpretation. These aspects of language use ensure the success of the third process of interpretation it can differentiate between a novice and a professional. They ensure the success or failure of the interpretative process.

If these obstacles are not properly managed, interpretation can become exceptionally difficult. These obstacles range from time management, abbreviations, uniformity in reaction, use of Jargons and numbering.

5. Time Management

Time management is a problem frequently encountered as a result of the higher cognitive load required for interpretation, generally due to strict time constraint and the absence of opportunities for revision, iterative refinement or editorial oversight. Time management has to do with the management of the interval between the input and the output, where the input corresponds to the SL while, and the output to the translated utterance produced by the interpreter in the TL. There is need to be conscious of this temporal relationship. For instance, in the source language, the speaker takes a total of one minute to deliver a statement, the TL rendition is not expected to exceed that one-minute span. However, expectation often defies reality, there are times or situations in which the interpreter ends up using more time than the speaker did in the SL.

At the point of interpreting, what is paramount is mutual comprehension: Speaker A have to understand everything speaker B intends to convey. Time management in practice often becomes inconsistent, especially the SL includes proverbs, and the interpreter senses that there is no direct equivalent proverb in the TL; in such case, further explanations may be necessary to enhance comprehension. In this situation, it becomes the interpreter's responsibility to manage the time spent on the delivery of message in the TL, balancing explicatory clarity with temporal economy. Abbreviations constitute a major use of language that affects time management, and an abbreviation in the SL can significantly influence the time required to deliver the message in the TL. For example, if there is an abbreviation in the SL whose expanded form is very long or whose TL equivalent exists in a different form, it is the interpreter's task to identify either an abbreviated version or an equivalent structure in the TL. A typical encounter in English to Chinese

interpretation is the abbreviation “NRDC” (National Development and Reform Commission). When interpreting this into Chinese, the interpreter has two options:

- Explain the function of the abbreviated term-
- that is, clarify what the institution or expression does or what domain it covers.
- Find the equivalent term in the TL.

Instead of spending time explaining each component of the abbreviation, the CI can identification of the TL equivalent and then use its abbreviated form to manage time. In the case of “NRDC” if the full term is expanded in Chinese, it would be “Guójiā Fāzhǎn hé Gǎigé Wěiyuánhui” a much longer sequence that would consume considerable delivery time. However, if the abbreviated equivalent “fa gai wei” (发改委) is used Chinese, the TL rendition will take essentially the same amount of time as the SL abbreviation. This also applies to company names, set phrases and similar expressions. If such TL equivalents are not used there is a risk that the thread of thought or the flow of the conversation may be disrupted while the interpreter struggles to unpack the full meaning of the abbreviation.

6. Abbreviation in Interpretation

While time management in speech discussed, it is clear that, when discussing time management, abbreviations must be taken into consideration. Time management and abbreviation are closely interwoven, and the relationship between them is such that abbreviation constitute a major endurance test for time management in consecutive interpretation. Therefore, when talking about time management, one cannot but also talk about abbreviations, as they affect time immensely.

Speakers in consecutive interpretation, especially in formal settings, usually deliver speech in a controlled but somewhat free-flowing manner. It is therefore, the Consecutive interpreter’s (CI) responsibility to work faster than normal discourse when an abbreviation occurs in the SL. This is where pre- interpretation anticipation strategy becomes particularly useful, preparing in advance for likely abbreviations and their equivalents in the TL.

If the CI does not use an abbreviated form in the TL, as previously mentioned, interpreting will encroach on the delivery time, because there is a very short window within which the interpretation must be delivered in the TL in consecutive translation. Therefore, the need for a continuous update of target language knowledge

in order to identify the shortest, most effective way of enhancing understanding is recognized.

Another situation encountered was such whereby the SL speaker uses only part of the full word or phrase instead of giving an outright abbreviation. In such cases, the core function or a salient element of the word or phrase serves as a substitute for the whole. For instance, the speaker may say “China Harbour” instead of “China Harbour Engineering Company” or the abbreviation- “CHEC”. In such instance, reliance on world knowledge and contextual awareness applied to interpretation was of utmost use.

7. Uniformity in Reaction

Uniformity in reaction is a challenge that is difficult to navigate in interpretation generally. Translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style (Nida and Taber 1982). The same principle can be applied to interpretation: in the course of interpretation, it is imperative that an interpreter is able to elicit the same reaction in the TL as in the SL, that is, the target language audience’s responses should match those of the SL speakers. The CI must therefore strive to achieve the same reaction in the TL, especially when interpreting to a group. A joke in SL should be rendered in such a way that it produces a similar response in the TL. If the CI fails to achieve a comparable reaction, it may cause a misunderstanding or conflict, as one side might think they are being made fun of. A CI thus has to mitigate against confusion by acting as a performer in both languages at the specific moment of delivery. The effects of non-uniformity in reaction include: A breakdown in communication; The perception among TL speakers that they are being ridiculed, which may lead to conflict; the emergence of suspicion among participants, which can undermine trust and collaboration.

8. Explanation of Terms

This problem is especially noticeable when SL has mentioned the names of the places, objects, or practices that are traditional or local. It is therefore pertinent for the interpreter to explain such terms beyond the immediate content, using the elaboration strategy to provide further clarification in the TL and enhance comprehension. A situation occurred, in interpreting from Nigerian English to Chinese, the SL mentioned a place in Nigeria – Mambila, “in the the Mambila project”, by simply rendering “Manila” into the TL would be very confusing for Chinese-speaking

participants if no further explanation is provided. Manila is a name of a location associated with a prominent hydroelectric project in Nigeria. In such situation, there was need to go further – yet quickly- and explain, outside the immediate context, the meaning of Mambila and the nature of the Mambila projects.

8.1 Professional Jargons

Professional Jargon, as the term implies, refers to words and expressions that are professional in nature and usually specific to different professions fields. When formal gathering concerns the electricity sector, the CI is essentially obligated to learn the vocabulary associated with electricity in order to interpret efficiently. Unlike a translator that has time to consult references, revise, and modify, the text, an interpreter works under severe time constraint. Therefore, the pre-interpretation anticipation strategy, involving background research in line with the theme of discussion, is essential before the interpreting session. Since professional jargon is typically present in both the SL and the TL, the interpreter must acquire familiarity with such terms in both languages to ensure accurate and rapid rendition.

8.2 Numbering

The interpretation of number from one language to another is often one of the most challenging aspects of consecutive interpretation, even though it seems and sound relatively easy. At the point of interpreting, the task can become highly demanding, especially when the SL and TL employ different numerical scales and cultural conventions. For example, numbering in Japanese has cultural specificity, and the Chinese numbering system has its own particular structure. It is not as straightforward easy as the English language, because the underlying cultural and linguistic nuances must be taken into account. In Chinese, after thousands, the scale proceeds to ten thousand then hundred thousand, which can easily lead to misinterpretation if the CI is not fully familiar with the pattern. An adequate and deep understanding of the numbering system in both SL and TL to ensure accuracy came in very handy.

9. The borderline between Professional and Regular conversation

During roundtable or formal discussions, there is often an interception between the professional and casual conversation. There are interjections such as jokes, sarcasm, or culturally specific asides that are not directly relevant to the main topic. The CI must

therefore be attentive to these shifts in register. The Omission or message abandonment strategy are used to avoid rendering elements that are judged to be redundant or potentially disruptive to the main line of discussion. This is especially important because what may be appropriate or acceptable in one language may not be equally appropriate in the other, and rendering such elements could cause misunderstanding or conflict. In this way, the CI functions as a mediator between the two, helping to ensure smooth communication and eliminate the risk of friction. However, jokes or remarks that generate a strong reaction among SL speakers should usually not be omitted, since leaving them out may create a sense of exclusion or suspicion on the part of the TL participants and thus increase the risk of conflict.

The aforementioned language use are used in the second and third phase of process that in the de verbalizing key points into a mental schema, and the reformulating of message in the target language with necessary adjustments for clarity. By linking phenomena such as jargon, proverbs, cultural nuance, abbreviation handling, uniformity of reaction, and numbering systems to cognitive sense processing, it is proposed that interpreter either possess a formal training or not will foreground an interpreter's ability to deliver.

10. Conclusion

This study has shown that consecutive interpreting in high level diplomatic settings is fundamentally a sense oriented, real-time process in which interpreters unconsciously mobilize a wide range of strategies to manage cognitive load, time pressure, and interactional demands. By demonstrating how anticipation, text expansion, abbreviation handling, management of professional jargon, numbering, and uniformity of reaction all operate within the three phase interpretive model of comprehension, de verbalization, and reformulation, the paper repositions these practices as manifestations of interpretive competence rather than mere compensatory tactics, shaped by deep seated linguistic competence and situational awareness rather than explicit methodological training. At the same time, the analysis argues that making these largely unconscious strategies explicit—through focused work on abbreviations, time management, register shifts, cultural nuance, numerical systems, and note taking—can strengthen interpreter education by anchoring it in a coherent cognitive model and foregrounding sense oriented processing, world knowledge, and contextual sensitivity over strict formal correspondence. By situating empirical data from Nigeria–China

diplomatic encounters within the interpretive paradigm, the work thus contributes both to theoretical reflection on interpreting and to the practical development of interpreters operating in complex, cross cultural negotiation environments, ultimately enhancing accuracy, rapport, and communicative effectiveness.

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Appendix A

