



The impact of sentence length and complexity on fluency in Turkish-English simultaneous interpreting

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Abstract

This study was designed as an explorative, descriptive, and observational/ experimental study. With a fluency-oriented approach to quality, it aims at presenting and discussing the results of an experiment designed so as to explore the impact of sentence length and complexity on quality in Turkish-English SI. In addition, the self-perceptions of interpreting students regarding their own interpreting performance obtained through post-experiment interviews will be discussed. In accordance with the objectives of the study, performance-related quality criteria rather than content-related quality criteria will be observed and fluency will be explored in terms of pauses, false starts, repairs, and repetitions.

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1. Introduction

The issue of quality is a highly debated concept in interpreting and there are various approaches to define this complex and multi-dimensional concept. Quality is relative and cannot be fixed on one single element (Pöchhacker 2013). The definition of the concept varies depending on the object and aim of the study. There are various criteria to determine the quality of interpreting. Quality, as a concept, is “ineffable, subjective, and cultural” (Macdonald 2013: 35). This study, after reviewing various approaches to quality and user expectations, aims to present the results of an experiment designed to assess the impact of sentence length and complexity on fluency as an element of quality. The second objective of the present study is to discuss the results of post-experiment interviews designed to obtain self-perceptions of interpreting students regarding the speeches they interpreted and their own interpreting performance. Turkish and English were selected as A and B languages respectively due to lack of studies in our field with Turkish as A language. In addition, the verb is at the end of the sentence in Turkish, making simultaneous interpreting highly challenging in Turkish to English SI and leading inevitably to anticipation as an interpreting strategy in this direction.

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2. Quality and user expectations

Quality of interpreting is defined in terms of a number of criteria and there is no consensus among studies on how to define quality. It should be kept in mind that interpreting quality is not absolute but contextually determined (Pignataro & Velardi 2013). Definition of quality relies on more than one factor arising from: “(1) the needs and expectations of clients and users, (2) the constraints and limitations imposed by the nature of SI itself and the situation in which it takes place, and (3) the interpreters’ skills for interpreting.” (Bacigalupe 2013: 11-12).

Quality has mostly been discussed in relation to user expectations in simultaneous interpreting as pioneered by Kurz (1989, 1993). According to Kurz (2001) it is only through assessing user expectations that quality can be measured and quality has been defined as user satisfaction. However, expectations and assessments of users are very diverse. Also, interpreters might sound very confident and give the feeling that they do not omit or change anything from the source speech although reality is different. Fidelity to the original is always one of the top parameters mentioned in quality surveys. However, it is very difficult for the users to know if the interpreter is actually faithful OR sounds so. As listed by Ingrid Kurz, a number of studies have been carried out on the issue of user expectations regarding quality (Kurz 2001: 398-403). Some of the user surveys included aspects related to the interpreter’s role (Marrone 1993, Vuorikoski 1993, Kopczynski 1994, Morris 1995, Pöchhacker 2000) while others (such as Kurz 1989) focused on the product-related criteria of Bühler (Pöchhacker 2001: 415). Riccardi also categorized the studies on quality as those on “customer expectations and priorities” and “error analysis and quality assessment in training” (Riccardi 2002: 26). The settings in which these surveys were carried out vary, as do the modes of interpreting analyzed. Also, some aim at finding out expectations while others explore responses and/or ask for evaluation and judgment, which affects the focus of the research considerably (Eraslan 2008: 7).

Fluency, as a parameter of quality, has been listed among the top criteria in user expectations studies. Aspects related to fluency have been studied in studies that contrasted user expectations with and user assessment of actual interpretations, exploring the effect of various factors on user assessment. Intonation as an aspect related to fluency was explored in an experimental study by Collados Ais (1998). In this study, users and interpreters were given a questionnaire in which they were asked to rate the importance of ten criteria for interpretations. Then they were asked to evaluate one of three interpretations. The interpretation they listened to was recorded as a voice-over and the original speech was the same. The first interpretation was accurate but it was presented in a monotonous way, the second version included errors but it was presented with a lively intonation, and the third one had no errors and it had a lively intonation. The lowest rating for overall quality was given to the correct but monotonous version. The two lively versions were rated equally by the interpreters whereas the lively and correct version was rated as the highest and the lively but incorrect version was rated slightly lower by the users. Interestingly, the monotonous version was rated as the lowest on aspects that were not changed such as terminology, style, professionalism, logical cohesion, sense consistency, and quality of voice. Therefore, it can be said that performance-related criteria might interfere with content-related criteria.

A similar trend was also observed with respect to silent pauses, as another fluency element, in the doctoral study by Pradas Macias (2003). Pauses were added to the simultaneous interpretation of a video. The version without pauses was rated as the highest in terms of not only fluency but also of criteria such as professionalism, logical cohesion, completeness and diction.

A more detailed investigation into all quality parameters was conducted at the University of Granada. In this study, a user expectations survey was conducted on 11 quality-related criteria (Collados Ais et al. 2007, Rennert 2010). Twelve versions of an interpretation were recorded as voice-over and 11 of these versions were manipulated for one of the quality criteria listed. The subjects consisting of 12

groups rated one of the versions and filled in a questionnaire regarding a specific parameter. Fluency ranked the fifth among 11 quality criteria (Pradas Macias 2007). The version manipulated for fluency was rated as lower than the video which was not manipulated in terms of fluency and other parameters including correct rendition of sense and completeness. Thus, fluency was observed as one of the factors that had a negative effect on overall quality. In another study, fluency was regarded as among the top three criteria out of 14 when users were asked to name the factors forming the first impression of an interpreter. Also, one of the main reasons for their choice of the best of four interpretations was fluency (Garcia Becerra 2007). Thus, although user views are very diverse, it seems that fluency is among the main factors while defining quality.

The findings from previous studies were confirmed by Rennert (2010) in a study which is part of her doctoral work. This study presents the results of an experiment conducted within the scope of the Project entitled *Quality in Simultaneous Interpreting (QuaSI)*. This Project was explained in detail also by Pöchhacker (2013). In this study, two interpreted versions of the same original speech were produced, one fluent and the other non-fluent with hesitations, false starts, pauses, and audible breathing. As for the results, the non-fluent version was perceived as less fluent. Also, the results obtained from the question on accuracy indicated that there is a slight tendency to consider the less fluent version as less accurate, although no such difference exists between the two versions:

[...]there is a link between perceived fluency and perception of the interpreter's accuracy, confirming previous studies that suggested that lower fluency may impact negatively on the perceived quality of an interpretation. [...] fluency cannot be ignored as a factor that influences audience perception (Rennert 2010: 112-113).

Thus, perceived fluency is linked to the perception of interpreter's accuracy. Although it is possible to talk about content-related criteria (sense consistency, fidelity to the original, terminology) and performance-related criteria (fluency, accent, voice quality, intonation, rhythm) in interpreting, "the dichotomy between content- and presentation-related criteria is far less clear-cut than widely believed" (Macdonald 2013: 52). According to Diriker (2011: *passim*) "users seem to perceive quality criteria as intertwined constructs with fuzzy borders". Thus, the interference of performance-related criteria with content-related criteria, user perception, and overall quality cannot be ignored.

2.1. Fluency as an element of quality

It is not possible to talk about a general consensus on the definition of fluency among researchers. However, there are some key factors that many studies draw on such as "speech rate, pauses, hesitations, lengthened syllables, repetitions, self-corrections, and false starts" (Rennert 2010: 103, Kurz and Pöchhacker 1995: 354, Mead 2005: 45, Tissi 2000: 112). Fluency, as an important parameter in speech, was dealt with in detail by Rennert, who defines fluency as:

a prosodic feature of speech that can be viewed as a function of a number of temporal variables. It is the complex interaction of pauses, audible breathing, hesitations, vowel and consonant lengthening, false starts, repairs, repetitions and the tempo of speech that creates the impression of fluency or a lack thereof. (Rennert 2013: 175).

Therefore fluency cannot be ignored as a factor that influences user perception. In order to explore the effect of sentence length on performance, if any, I decided to focus on fluency rather than content. Fluency will be dealt with in terms of pauses, false starts, repairs, and repetitions. Pauses can be distinguished in terms of their positions – syntactic or non-syntactic – or also in terms of length. In this study, pauses that are longer than 3 seconds will be explored. False starts occur when the interpreter starts a new sentence without completing one. Repairs include the correction of errors whereas

repetitions are used for various purposes such as gaining time for planning the speech or bridging two sentences that are separated by pauses (Rennert 2010, p. 103).

3. Methodology

This study aims at gaining an insight into the following two research questions:

- 1- What is the impact of sentence length and complexity on fluency defined as pauses, false starts, repairs, and repetitions in Turkish-English SI?
- 2- What are the self-perceptions of interpreting students regarding speeches with differing sentence lengths and their own performance whilst interpreting them?

In order to seek answers to these questions, data collection consists of two phases: recordings of interpreting performance and post-experiment interviews. The study was designed as an explorative, descriptive, and observational/experimental study, producing controlled conditions not in order to test a specific hypothesis, but aiming at making inferences based on the results of the experiment as a whole (Gile 1994: 50).

3.1. Participants

The participants in the study consist of 8 senior Translation and Interpreting students from Dokuz Eylül University. Similar background knowledge is significant therefore the participants were selected among the students at the same grade. The level of the class and the competence of the students are more or less comparable. The performance of the students was recorded in university SI booths. The students were given prior briefing and they were informed that their performance would be analyzed in the framework of a research project. Although it should be kept in mind that it was a simulated SI situation, the conditions were similar to that of a real conference. The texts to be interpreted were not given to the students.

3.2. Experiment

The level and experience of the participants included in the study were taken into account during the selection of the speeches to be interpreted. Two texts in Turkish were selected in the same subject field. The texts were considered appropriate for SI because they were topical and they did not require preparation from the interpreters. The first speech was given originally on the 27th of May, 2016 in the opening session of UN Least Developed Countries Meeting by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. This speech consisted mainly of short sentences. The second speech was given on the 14th of June, 2017 at the opening session of a panel organized by Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD) and Koç University Economic Research Forum by a member of the Executive Board of TÜSİAD Barış Oran. This speech consisted of longer sentences including relative clauses in order to explore whether fluency of the interpreter varies depending on the length and complexity of the speech to be interpreted. The Çavuşoğlu speech consisted of 41 sentences whereas the Oran speech consisted of 25 sentences. The source texts were not technical in nature and befitted the occasion of an opening speech in terms of style, vocabulary, and register. The syntax of the Oran speech was more complex compared to the Çavuşoğlu speech. In order to remove the variable of unfamiliar terminology, a vocabulary test including possible new terms in the texts was given to the students two weeks in advance. The students were asked to send the audio-recordings of the meanings of the new terms to their professor. Also, the students were given vocabulary tests right before the experiment in order to make sure the variable of terminology is removed.

3.3. Post-experiment interviews

Semi-structured post-experiment interviews were conducted with interpreting students right after their interpreting experience to get immediate feedback and detailed information regarding the speeches they interpreted and self-perceptions of their own performance.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Performance

The first research question investigated the impact of sentence length on fluency. In accordance with this objective, four easily identifiable variables were defined: pauses, false starts, repairs, and repetitions. The chart below indicates the frequency of these variables whilst interpreting two speeches in the same subject field from Turkish to English. These two speeches have differing sentence lengths and the Çavuşoğlu speech (ST1) that was analyzed included short and simple sentences whereas the Oran speech (ST2) consisted of longer sentences, relative clauses, and complex phrases. The two speeches were transcribed and analyzed in terms of the above-mentioned variables.

Table 1. Analysis of fluency parameters during the interpretation of the Çavuşoğlu speech. (Source text 1)

	Pauses	False Starts	Repairs	Repetitions
Interpreter A	6	3	6	-
Interpreter B	8	9	3	5
Interpreter C	5	-	3	4
Interpreter D	3	2	4	-
Interpreter E	3	5	10	9
Interpreter F	5	1	10	-
Interpreter G	5	3	9	-
Interpreter H	9	2	5	2
Total	44	25	50	20

Table 2. Analysis of fluency parameters during the interpretation of the Oran speech. (Source text 2)

	Pauses	False Starts	Repairs	Repetitions
Interpreter A	2	6	7	3
Interpreter B	20	12	4	2
Interpreter C	8	1	7	4
Interpreter D	3	4	8	-
Interpreter E	9	6	10	12
Interpreter F	15	3	14	3
Interpreter G	11	3	5	3
Interpreter H	19	4	7	5
Total	87	39	62	32

4.2. Post-experiment interviews

The second research question focused on the self-perceptions of interpreting students regarding speeches with differing sentence lengths and their own interpreting performance whilst interpreting them. To this end, post-experiment interviews were conducted to elicit their feedback.

According to the results of the post-experiment interviews, 6 among 8 interpreters were unsatisfied with their own interpreting performance due to various reasons, such as inconsistency (Interpreter G), difficulty of the Çavuşoğlu speech (Interpreter F), not being fast enough (Interpreter E), and long and complex sentences (Interpreter A, B, C, D). Interpreter C stated that she was satisfied with her performance and Interpreter H said that he was satisfied especially with his performance whilst interpreting the first speech. They all agreed that the speech was not too fast to interpret. 6 among 8 interpreters mentioned that the Oran speech was technical in nature and more difficult compared to the Çavuşoğlu speech. All interpreters agreed that the vocabulary test was very helpful. If it had not been for the vocabulary test, the speeches would have been even more difficult for them to interpret. Interpreter A and Interpreter F stated that there were too many numbers in the Çavuşoğlu speech. Interpreter A talked about complex phrases that she missed whereas Interpreter B emphasized that grammar and syntactic structures made it difficult for her to interpret especially the Oran speech. Interpreter D and Interpreter E also mentioned long sentences and complex syntactic structures that gave them a hard time. Interpreter C stated that the syntactic differences between the two languages also caused problems and that long sentences inevitably affected her performance negatively. She added that the fact that Turkish is a head-final language and English is a head-initial language, i.e., having the verb at the end of the sentence in Turkish and having it at the beginning of the sentence following the subject in English led to a more difficult interpretation. She also mentioned that she had to anticipate the verb at times and the majority of her interpretation through anticipation was correct. Interpreter G and Interpreter H also said that the strategy of anticipation was functional at times. They were correct predictions and they fit the context of the speech. Interpreter E and Interpreter F stated that they were not fast enough to catch up with the speech and they missed certain parts whereas Interpreter D said that he missed certain parts while recalling from memory and thinking of the meanings of words. Interpreter H mentioned that he missed some key points and tried to convey the message.

As for quality criteria, Interpreters A, B, C, E, F, G, and H mentioned accuracy and fluency. Interpreter D emphasized the importance of sense transfer without getting stuck at individual words. Interpreter A and Interpreter H referred also to knowledge of terminology. Interpreter F said that the lack of pauses was another indicator of quality. Interpreter H was the only one who underlined the importance of accent especially in Turkish to English interpretation. Thus, interpreters mentioned the most evident and well-known quality criteria by addressing fluency and content of the speech. This study has addressed the former and found the disfluencies in interpreter trainees' renditions, reaching the following conclusions and aspects for further discussion.

5. Conclusions

In this study, the first research question investigated the impact of sentence length on fluency. In accordance with this objective, four easily identifiable variables were defined: pauses, false starts, repairs, and repetitions. These variables were counted in the transcriptions of student interpreters' performances and indicated in the charts above according to each source text and each individual performance. As seen in the total figures, the number of parameters affecting fluency is higher in the Oran speech (ST 2) compared to the Çavuşoğlu speech (ST 1). Thus, sentence length and complexity has an impact on fluency defined as pauses, false starts, repairs, and repetitions.

The second research question focused on the self-perceptions of interpreting students regarding speeches with differing sentence lengths and their own interpreting performance whilst interpreting them. Accordingly, most students were not satisfied with their own performance. They expressed that ST 2 included longer and more complex sentences compared to ST 1 and syntactic differences had an

influence on the quality of interpreting. In terms of quality criteria, they mentioned accuracy and fluency and also talked about knowledge of the terminology, accent, and lack of pause.

This study has addressed fluency parameters and put forth the impact of sentence length and complexity on these parameters. Further research is also needed in terms of content-related quality criteria as well as performance-related quality criteria, taking into account the fuzzy borders between the two and the long debated concept of quality in interpreting.

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Türkçe'den İngilizce'ye simültane çeviride cümle uzunluğu ve karmaşık cümle yapısının akıcılık üzerindeki etkisi

Öz

Bu çalışma, araştırma amaçlı, betimleyici, gözlemsel/deneysel bir çalışma olarak tasarlanmıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, kaliteye akıcılık odaklı bir yaklaşımla, Türkçe'den İngilizce'ye simültane çeviride cümle uzunluğu ve karmaşık cümle yapısının kalite üzerindeki etkisini araştırmak için tasarlanan bir deneyin sonuçlarını ortaya koymak ve tartışmaktır. Buna ek olarak, deney sonrası görüşmeler yoluyla, sözlü çeviri öğrencilerinin kendi performanslarına ilişkin algıları da tartışılacaktır. Çalışmanın amacına uygun olarak, içerikle bağlantılı kalite kriterleri yerine performansla bağlantılı kalite kriterleri incelenecektir ve akıcılık, duraksamalar, yanlış başlangıçlar, düzeltmeler ve tekrarlar açısından ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Sözlü çeviri kalitesi; akıcılık; simültane çeviri

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