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Effect of prosody awareness training on the quality of consecutive interpreting between English and Farsi

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Chapter one

General introduction

1.1 About the dissertation

There were a number of things that triggered my interest in the field of interpreting and phonetics. First of all, being a foreign language learner myself and having studied English, Turkish and German as three foreign languages, pronunciation, foreign accent and intelligibility of my own speech have inevitably been serious issues for me at least during the last decade of my life. There were two topics in particular that helped me to narrow down my focus. A seminar on teaching English as foreign language set me off thinking of the importance of prosodic features and intonation for the intelligibility of speech. But more important to my inspiration was my interpreting class in connection with the issue of language pedagogy. One of the issues raised in this class was that according to some linguists the best way for foreign language learners of English to learn the pronunciation perfectly was to increase their phonetic awareness. The issue of learning English language to be an interpreter developed into my interest in a related area: Farsi and English prosodic features awareness for Iranian student interpreter trainees. The prevailing interest in my case was the question of whether there are ways of teaching pronunciation that would provide students with tools to better understand second language prosodic features and intonation while receiving the incoming message, so that they can interpret the message more adequately.

The aim of the dissertation is to investigate the role of prosodic feature awareness training on the quality of interpretation achieved by interpreter trainees. It aims to establish a solid platform for developing theories on training interpreters. Also, the study aims to get results which may increase both the intelligibility and naturalness of our systems within speech production and raise the efficacy of recognition in our interpreting. So far, no empirical studies have been done on the effect of prosodic awareness on the quality of interpreting.

The dissertation tries to investigate the issue of prosodic feature awareness training on different aspects of interpretation and also looks at the current ongoing problematic areas in the curriculum of interpreter training programs.

The remainder of this introductory chapter gives an overview of the chapters in the rest of this dissertation. **Chapter 2** gives an introduction to the interpreting process, tries to look at different dimensions of this process, and elaborates some prominent issues on the pedagogy of interpreting. **Chapter 3** investigates the effect of prosodic feature awareness training on the quality of consecutive interpreting from English into Farsi by interpreter trainees, i.e. interpreting from a foreign language into one's native language

– which we will also refer to as ‘straight interpreting’. The quality of the interpreting performance is established by immediate intersubjective ratings on ten different aspects of interpreting quality given by three expert judges.

If prosody awareness has a beneficial effect on this process, then it must be the case that the increased awareness contributes to better word recognition (awareness of word stress) and to better comprehension (e.g., through anticipating on prosodic phrase structure and focus marking) of the input language, i.e. English. The specific effect of prosodic awareness training on these two subskills of the interpreting process from foreign into native language is tested in the next two chapters. **Chapter 4** systematically investigates the effect of awareness training of prosodic features on the development of word recognition skills for Farsi-English interpreter trainees. **Chapter 5** investigates the effect of awareness training of prosodic features on the development of listening comprehension for Farsi-English interpreter trainees. **Chapter 6** is a replication of the experiment carried out in Chapter 5, with one crucial complication in that it compares the relative contribution of awareness training of segmental features with that of prosodic features on developing listening comprehension in English as the target language.

Chapter 7 investigates the effect of explicit teaching of prosody on consecutive interpreting performance from Farsi into English by interpreter trainees, i.e., from native into foreign language – which process is often referred to as ‘inverse interpreting’. Increased prosodic awareness should be especially beneficial in the output in the foreign language rather than help to understand the input speech – which should not be a problem since the input speech is in the interpreter’s native language.

Chapter 8 tries to relate the intersubjective expert judgments to objective measures of interpreting quality that can be expected to correlate with the judgments. Objective measures can be either counts of errors in transcripts of the interpretations or phonetic measures of fluency of delivery. If such correlates can be found, the expert judgment can be predicted by some combination of objective measures. If the prediction is sufficiently accurate, expert judgments could be dispensed with in the future and be replaced by objective measurements.

We hypothesize that the beneficial effect of prosody awareness should be larger when interpreting into the foreign language (inverse interpreting) than when interpreting from foreign into native language (straight interpreting). In **Chapter 9** this directionality hypothesis is tested against the subjective ratings obtained in Chapters 3 (from foreign into native language) and 8 (from native into foreign language) on the one hand, and against the objective quality measures in Chapter 7 on the other.

Chapter 10 investigates the effective choice of methodology in teaching prosody for interpreter trainees. It compares the explicit teaching vs. implicit teaching of prosody for Farsi-English interpreter trainees.

Chapter 11, finally, summarizes the main points of the dissertation, formulates the overall conclusions of this dissertation, suggests pedagogical implications and makes recommendations for future research.

All the experimental chapters have been, or will be, published as independent articles, either in professional journals or in conference proceedings. Each chapter is therefore self-contained. Nevertheless, it might help the reader if some background knowledge is presented by way of general introduction to the topic of interpreting. This will lead to some overlap with explanations given in the individual chapters.

1.2 Training future interpreters

Imagine a situation where person A only speaks and understands his native language A and person B only commands his native language B. Imagine next that the languages A and B are so different from each other that no mutual intelligibility is possible. Such situations abound in the world of international commerce, politics and diplomacy. Communication between A and B then requires the help of an interpreter, i.e. an intermediary third person who commands both languages. The interpreter listens to speaker A, the sender, and then formulates speaker A's intentions in the other language B so that B, the receiver, will understand the message. If sender and receiver switch roles, then the interpreter first listens to language B and provides a rendition of B's intentions using appropriate formulations in language A. Interpreting is different than translating, since interpreting uses spoken language only and is immediate: the interpreter has to come up with a rendition of the speakers message in real time. A translator takes written input, and can generally take as much time as is needed to consult dictionaries, grammars and other translation tools to deliver a polished product in the target language. An interpreter has to deliver on the spur of the moment. Interpreting, therefore, is a very complex and cognitively demanding linguistic skill.

Two kinds of interpreting are used in practice. The first is simultaneous interpreting, where the interpreter has to provide a rendition of message A in language B while speaker A is producing continuous speech. This requires listening and understanding input speech in language A while at the same time producing output speech in language B. The second type is called consecutive interpreting. Here the interpreter waits until the sender has produced a complete paragraph in his language A. The sender is then silent for a while, allowing the interpreter time to reproduce in language B his rendition of what he has just heard. Consecutive interpreting avoids the dual task of listening and speaking at the same time (in different languages) but has the disadvantage that the interpreter has to keep a fairly precise representation of speaker A's intentions in memory during the time that A is talking. This puts a heavy burden on the interpreter's working memory, possibly more so than in simultaneous interpreting (e.g., Tímarová et al. 2015). The present dissertation is entirely about this second type of interpreting, i.e., consecutive interpreting.

People may well think that anyone who knows two languages can do an interpreting job but it is not true. To be a qualified interpreter one needs intensive training. In order to produce qualified interpreters through effective training, the curriculum of interpreter training programs should be looked upon carefully. In my view, the interpreter training curriculum as it is currently implemented in Iran demands reconsideration through incorporating recent findings from applied linguistics so that future interpreters can communicate messages more effectively between two parties (such as A and B above).

One of the neglected areas in interpreting training programs are sounds and prosody, i.e., the first phenomena interpreters are exposed to in the communication of messages. In the field of interpreting, one of the first deficiencies which are perceived clearly is a lack of experienced instructors who are familiar with the theoretical aspects of message perception and communication. The most important reasons would be that most interpreters are not qualified instructors themselves, because they are not aware of linguistic principles underlying message communication, especially the importance of prosody in message communication (e.g., Pearl 1995, Yenkimaleki & Van Heuven 2013, 2016a, b). Producing pedagogical materials based on recent findings in the area of phonetics and their application in interpreter training programs is felt necessary.

In this regard, my personal work experience as an instructor in interpreter training programs led me to the idea of modifying the current existing syllabus by systematic investigation of awareness training of prosodic features for interpreter trainees and its effect on the quality of their performance.

1.3 Prosody awareness and interpreting

Massey (2007) claims that translation and interpreting pave the way for people with different language backgrounds to communicate with each other even if they do not understand each other's language. Nolan (2012) also believes that translators, by translating materials from source language into target language, make information available in a comprehensible fashion for lots of people who would otherwise have no access to these materials. Moreover, he states that, before translating, the translator has the opportunity to conduct comprehensive research of different sources in order to achieve an accurate reproduction of the original meaning of the text but the interpreter, when listening to the source language, is to transfer the message to the audience on the spot; he has no time for any research or to consult with others during the interpretation process. Massey (2007: 1) holds that in the past there has been a tendency to perceive interpreting as an alternative form of translation, but from the second half of the 20th century onwards differentiation between the two areas has become necessary.

Whalley and Hansen (2006) talk about prosodic sensitivity. They state that prosodic sensitivity has three elements which contribute to linguistic rhythm awareness. These elements are (i) lexical stress, which would be any syllable in a word that receives emphasis, (ii) intonation patterns, which would be the rise and fall of pitch that over the course of the sentence, and (iii) pause patterns, which can be between words or anywhere in the utterance that would correspond with punctuation mark in a written text.

Prosodic feature awareness training can be useful for interpreters both in speech production and speech recognition. Studying the role of prosodic awareness can provide a solid platform for developing theories of training interpreters. Mahjani (2003) states that prosodic feature awareness may enhance the naturalness and intelligibility of language in speech production and can also lead to more efficient processing of input speech during the interpreting process. Investigations in this area can make us understand different interactions between prosodic structure and other linguistic or para-

linguistic domains (syntax, semantics, pragmatics...). Therefore, different languages with various prosodic types and with different intonation patterns widen our horizon to understand the importance of prosodic feature awareness and can help us develop efficient training methods that pave the way to communicate messages from one language to another.

Huber (2005) pointed out that interpreters systematically take advantage of prosodic properties of the non-native language to access complementary and compensatory information in message perception and to resolve ambiguities of utterances. Moreover, Derwing et al. (1998) experimentally demonstrated that awareness training resulted in better intelligibility of utterances produced by second-language learners who had been instructed to emphasize the prosodic feature of stress; later those second language learners were found to transfer their acquired perceptual skill to spontaneous speech production as well. Therefore, considering all the aspects in training future interpreters, paying attention to prosodic features as an important aspect in the curriculum seems of utmost importance.

1.4 Teaching prosody to interpreters

Studies in the teaching of prosody of English as a foreign language (EFL) during the last decade have made clear the significance of suprasegmental (i.e. prosodic) features (e.g., stress, rhythm and intonation) in the production of language and perception of spoken messages (Anderson-Hsieh et al. 1992, Anderson 1993, Brazil et al. 1980; cited in Chela-Flores 2003: 1). Moreover, it has also been found (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe 1998) that EFL students who had received awareness training emphasizing suprasegmental features, would transfer their knowledge to spontaneous language production in the real world. However, prosodic feature awareness training is not a priority in most EFL and interpreting programs or in materials for instruction (which are currently lacking). The lack of teaching suprasegmentals is not due to extensive gaps in theoretical insights or lack of pedagogical materials but to the fact that practitioners consider it unimportant (Chela-Flores 2003). Rather, the lack of attention seems to be due to the intrinsic difficulty found in the teaching of stress and intonation (Roach 1991: 11; cited in Chela-Flores 2003). In line with this view, Roach (1996: 47) claims that applied linguists should differentiate between what native English speakers do and what the needs of learners of English as a second language would be.

Therefore, according to the findings of my studies and the experimental work that I did, it is highly recommended that curriculum designers of interpreting programs include prosodic feature awareness training in the necessary syllabus for training future interpreters in order to enhance the quality of communication of the message. Moreover, material producers for interpreting programs should include the technical aspects and theoretical discussion of prosodic awareness in their materials for instructors in academic settings.

1.5 The issue of directionality

It is rarely the case that translators or interpreters are perfect bilinguals with equal command of both their working languages. Typically, the translator or interpreter learnt one language as the mother tongue, and acquired the second working language at a later stage in life, as a foreign language during a training program as part of a university curriculum. This, obviously, leads to an asymmetry in the proficiency with which the two languages are spoken and perceived. There is a substantial body of literature that shows that speakers and listeners have a (much) poorer command of non-native languages than of their native language. Even in the case of so-called perfect (or early) bilinguals some asymmetry persists, so that one language is dominant over the other. It is also well documented that receptive (sometimes called ‘passive’) language skills are better developed than a speaker/listener’s productive (or ‘active’) skills. For instance, our passive vocabulary is larger than the active vocabulary: we recognize and understand a much wider range of words than the words that we would actively use ourselves (e.g., Laufer 1998, Brysbaert et al. 2016). Similarly, we are able to interpret syntactic structures that we would never produce spontaneously. The wider scope of our receptive linguistic knowledge will be found both when performing in the native and in the foreign language.

Hypothetically, these two observations have far-reaching consequences for the quality of translation or interpreting jobs. Translators/interpreters will be able to process and interpret highly complex sentences and specialized vocabulary in a non-native working language, which they will not be able to produce in that language themselves. Once interpreted, however, it will be easy for the translator/interpreter to come up with adequate structures in his native language that would express the message he has distilled from the non-native input. In the reverse case, the interpreter will have no difficulty in understanding the input in his native language, but severe loss of quality will be incurred when the message is expressed in the limited vocabulary and restricted and less readily accessible grammatical structures in the non-native target language. The handicap of having to express oneself in a non-native target language will be larger for interpreters than for translators. A translator (of written text) may consult dictionaries, grammars, and a range of digital tools and resources so that, with enough time and effort, the quality of the non-native language will come close to the native ideal. Interpreting a spoken message, however, demands that the interpreter produce the non-native equivalent (almost) instantaneously and without consultation of external resources.

The (predicted) greater difficulty of translating or interpreting from one’s native language into a foreign language, as opposed to translating from a foreign language into one’s mother tongue, is referred to as the issue of ‘directionality’ (e.g., Beeby 2009). Directionality has received relatively little attention in the field of translation and interpreting studies. Though some scholars have recently started to discuss it in terms of their own intuitions and experiences, the phenomenon has not been investigated systematically. In fact, the directionality problem has been practically evaded for a long time. Translation into the foreign language, also called ‘reverse translation’, was simply disapproved (e.g., Newmark 1988) until the 1990s when some scholars started to investigate this issue (e.g., Pavlović 2013). Most translators in the western world trans-

late into their first language (Pokoin 2000). While there are translators who work into their second language, this is less common practice and it is imbued with negative connotations (Kearns 2007). Some scholars (e.g., Newmark 1988) believe that inverse translation, i.e. into the foreign language, results in non-authentic text. Newmark goes even further and says that translation into the second language may well result in amusement and laughter on the part of the native recipient. Be this as it may, an interpreter training curriculum should pay attention to both directions of translating (or interpreting) since translation into the foreign language may be necessary when no first-language translators (or interpreters) are available. Therefore, in this study the issue of directionality is investigated systematically, in an attempt to answer the question which direction of interpreting (straight or inverse) is more sensitive to prosody training.

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