

Original Paper

Cognitive Strategies for the Management of Culture-Specific Items in English-Chinese Simultaneous Interpreting

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Abstract

Simultaneous interpreting presents significant cognitive challenges, particularly when interpreters encounter Culture-Specific Items (CSIs). This study explores the cognitive processes involved in interpreting CSIs between English and Chinese, focusing on the difficulties posed by the lack of extra-linguistic knowledge, comprehension ambiguity, and the absence of equivalents in the target language. Through comprehensive analysis and professional interviews, the research identifies and discusses effective coping strategies employed by interpreters to mitigate cognitive load. These strategies include paraphrasing, finding equivalents, literal interpreting, and strategic omission. Findings from this study offer valuable insights and practical guidance for learners and practitioners of simultaneous interpreting, enhancing their ability to manage CSIs more effectively and improve overall interpreting performance.

Keywords

simultaneous interpreting, culture-specific items, interpreting strategies

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, interpreting is not merely about linguistics, but also about culture. Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) have received extensive attention among all language problems in intercultural contexts, and they can result in cultural shock if not conveyed properly. Interpreting CSIs presents challenges at both the linguistic and cognitive levels. As cultural mediators, interpreters must adeptly manage diverse cultural expressions, considering the "intentions, perceptions, and expectations" of target audience to facilitate effective communication (Bassnett, 2011).

This dual role of interpreters necessitates not only linguistic skills but also an in-depth understanding of cultural connotation. Interpreters are often faced with the task of conveying complex cultural nuances

that vary significantly across cultures and individuals. Such impact may be manifested at the levels of comprehension, processing, and production. The Effort Model suggests that simultaneous interpreters use 80% of their capacity for listening and comprehension and allocate the remaining 20% for production (Padilla et al., 1995). Professional interpreters possess better comprehension skills as they have quicker access to lexical and semantic information and better coordination of cognitive tasks (Bajo, Padilla, & Padilla, 2000). However, cultural segments that require greater listening and processing efforts may overload memory capacity and increase cognitive load. The pressure of comprehending CSIs may result in cognitive saturation or failure, particularly when the interpreter is not familiar with the CSI, leading to cognitive anxiety, reduced confidence, and ultimately, poor interpreting performance.

Despite extensive research on translating Chinese CSIs into English, particularly with complex constructs such as four-character words and idioms (Huang, 2013; Si, 2015; Bourne, 2016), there is a noticeable gap in studies focused on handling English CSIs in Chinese simultaneous interpreting, which signals the need for a dedicated investigation into the strategies that simultaneous interpreters employ to manage such challenges effectively.

This study aims to bridge this research gap by analyzing practical instances of English CSIs in Chinese contexts during simultaneous interpreting. Through this analysis, the paper will explore coping strategies employed by interpreters, including paraphrasing, finding equivalents, literal interpreting, and omission, which are crucial for enhancing interpretative accuracy when rendering CSIs. By providing these insights, the study intends to offer valuable guidance for interpreters in managing the complex interplay of language and culture in simultaneous interpreting settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture-Specific Challenges in Interpreting

Language transfer associates with cultural exchange in a dynamic and inseparable way (Aixelá, 1996; Bassnett, 2011). In a global and transnational setting, it is essential to understand culture diversity and pay close attention to cultural differences. Language is a means of reflecting and representing cultural characteristics, as words and expressions are carriers of a country's profound culture and history (Nida, 1945; Newmark, 1991). The cultural differences between languages, such as English and Chinese, must be explored in cross-cultural relations (Newmark, 1991).

Interpreters act as cultural mediators in a global context, supported by the term “the mediating person” (Bochner, 1981), and later the term “cultural interpreter” was used to describe someone who assists in bilingual or multilingual communication (Katan, 2004). Cultural mediators facilitate communication and understanding among individuals or communities with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In the book *Translating Cultures*, David Katan (2004) suggests that the role of translators, interpreters and mediators overlap with each other. Most times, interpreting, just like translating, is not simple “technical procedures of specialized or local interest, but rather to underwrite all cultural transactions,

from the most benign to the most venal” (Brodzki, 2007, cited from Bassnett, 2011).

Therefore, in cross-cultural contexts, interpreters must keep their eyes on expressions with cultural connotations, known as culture-specific items. According to Aixelá (1996), culture-specific items are defined as those that involve a translation problem when transferred from the source language to the target language considering their function and connotations in the source text, and their different inter-textual status in the target culture. Aixelá (1996) identified the major difficulty in interpreting CSIs as the fact that everything in a language is produced by culture, starting with the language itself.

2.2 Cognitive Coping Strategies

The decision-making process in selecting which strategies to use in simultaneous interpreting is a trade-off act where interpreters need to balance the level of information completeness and fidelity with the acceptability of the target audience. Culture-specific items play a critical role in language transference as they are often used to explain source culture to the target audience. As cultural mediators, interpreters should strive to cross cultural boundaries and explore the unexpressed meanings to ensure the accuracy and cultural appropriateness of the target speech (Bassnett, 2011). Each interpreter has their own strategies to interpret culture-specific items, and it is common for them to use different strategies to address the same problem (Aixelá, 1996).

Numerous strategies have been proposed for interpreting cultural items. Hervey et al. (1995) suggest four degrees of cultural transposition, including exoticism, calque, cultural borrowing, communicative interpreting, and cultural transplantation. Venuti (1995) argues for the use of foreignization, which prioritizes information retention, over domestication, which can result in the loss of information. Aixelá (1996) proposes two general principles of strategies: conservation and substitution. Specifically, rating from lesser to greater manipulation, conservative strategies are repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic (non-cultural) translation, extra-textual and intra-textual gloss. Substitutive strategies are synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion and autonomous creation. Newmark (1988) suggests a range of strategies such as transference, cultural equivalent, neutralization, literal translation, label, naturalization, componential analysis, deletion, couplet, accepted standard translation, paraphrase, gloss, notes, and others. Katan (2004) highlights generalization, deletion, and distortion as three key strategies to deal with cultural items. Baker (2011) proposes to use superordinate, a more neutral/less expressive word, cultural substitution, a loan word, paraphrasing, omission and illustration.

These strategies highlight the need for interpreters to be not only bilingual but also bicultural, equipped with a deep understanding of both source and target cultures to effectively manage CSIs. By employing a range of strategic approaches, interpreters can navigate the complexities of cultural differences, ensuring that translations are not only linguistically accurate but also culturally resonant.

3. Research Design

The study aims to identify interpreting strategies employed by different interpreters and explore the cognitive decision-making process involved in culture-specific interpreting.

3.1 Participants

This research involves ten professional simultaneous interpreters who have received formal training in this field. All participants are native Chinese speakers with English as their second language, which ensures a uniform language proficiency baseline among the subjects. This homogeneity in linguistic background is intended to minimize variability in interpreting skills that might otherwise be influenced by individual language competencies.

3.2 Materials and Procedure

The source speech, entitled “A Summer School Kids Actually Want to Attend” was publicly accessed on the website www.ted.com. As indicated by the title, the speech focuses on the general topic of education, and does not have technical language. However, the use of unfamiliar names and titles may increase the load on memory and processing efforts (Gile, 1995), particularly if they are not familiar with them in the target language. To mitigate the impact, proper nouns were provided in an instruction sheet. The researcher also controlled the moderate speed rate of the speech to 135 words per minute. Hence the primary challenge in the simultaneous interpreting of this speech was controlled to the management of culture-specific items.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the subjects to understand the cognitive process and choices of strategies during the interpreting exercise. The interviews are interactive, allowing the researcher to further explore individual perceptions and motivations.

3.3 Data Analysis

The study analyses the utilization of different interpreting strategies in handling Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) during simultaneous interpreting. To facilitate this analysis, the researcher selected key segments from the source speech and compared them with their corresponding interpretations in the target language. Each target segment was coded with terms identifying the employed strategies, such as “generalizing”, “deletion”, “equivalent”, or “literal interpreting”. The approach focuses on maintaining alignment with the sentential structure and word choice of the target language to underscore the differences between various interpretations. For example, the source segment “dropped out of a two-year college” yielded different interpretations: “从大学辍学” (dropped out from a university) and “辍学” (dropped out) were both tagged with the strategy “generalizing”. These versions simplify the original phrase by omitting the duration of study. “上了两年大学就辍学了” (dropped out after two years in the university) was tagged with “literal interpreting”. This version retains the specific detail, reflecting a closer adherence to the source text’s explicit content.

This coding and comparison method allows for a detailed examination of the cultural nuances in interpreting strategies, illustrating how different approaches can lead to variations in conveying the same information, based on the interpreter’s choices.

4. Discussion on coping Strategies

Comprehension is a critical first stage in processing CSIs, as reported by participants. Contextual understanding dictates which strategies to use in interpreting segments. Consistent with Gile's comprehension equation (1995), the research findings indicate that effective interpretation requires both linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge. Lack of background knowledge and cultural differences can make it difficult to understand some expressions. For instance, the term "two-year college", which in the US refers specifically to community colleges—a concept not present in Chinese culture. Misinterpretations occur if interpreters are unfamiliar with this educational system. They would easily misunderstand it as "dropped out after two years in college" or if better, generalize it as "dropped out". This example underscores the critical need for interpreters to possess extensive background knowledge to grasp and convey the CSIs accurately. Based on comprehension, different coping strategies can be applied to render cultural differences during the cognitive process of simultaneous interpreting.

4.1 Finding an Equivalent

The practice of finding equivalents is commonly used by interpreters when dealing with straightforward expressions. This approach involves identifying equivalent terms that the interpreter is already familiar with or that exist in both languages. Interpreters are likely to provide an equivalent in the target language without much hesitation, as though they have a bilingual corpus stored in their memory. For example, the term "New York" has a well-established equivalent in Chinese and such familiarity would reduce cognitive pressure for interpreters. Efficient word retrieval, a crucial subskill of simultaneous interpreting that affects interpreting performance (Christoffels, De Groot, & Waldorp, 2003) is enabled due to the existence of equivalents, and normally, word retrieval time is expected to be short in such cases. However, interpreters may experience difficulties recalling less straightforward target expressions, especially under temporal stress. For instance, an interpreter expended considerable effort and time finding an equivalent for "black and Latino kids" due to overconfidence in their familiarity with the expression. This effort resulted in a failure to process subsequent expressions, such as "poor inner-city kids" in the same sentence. This means expressions that have equivalents can also lead to increased cognitive load, and consequently time expenditure and information loss.

To improve simultaneous interpreting performance, it is essential to enhance word-retrieval efficiency, allowing interpreters to recall equivalents more readily from their memory. Interpreters should bear in mind that they need to make quick decisions if finding an equivalent is not feasible. It is a trade-off that requires quick-witted consideration.

4.2 Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a widely used technique among interpreters when an equivalent translation of the source material is difficult to find. This method is helpful in preserving the main idea of the original speech. For instance, one interviewee rephrased the statement "the achievement gap...could be directly attributed to the summer learning loss" into "成绩差距是可以通过暑期学校进行弥补的 (achievement gap could be bridged by summer school)." The interpreter paraphrased it using their

understanding of the context, successfully conveying the intended connotation to the target audience. However, the downside of paraphrasing is that the interpreter may end up producing a longer and wordier version than the original speech and important details may be omitted. In the above example, the interpreter failed to point out that the achievement gap referred to black and white kids. This is because the load on short-term memory incurs a risk of information loss when the interpreter lags behind the speaker. Therefore, interpreters need to balance the need for retaining essential information while also being concise when using the strategy of paraphrasing.

4.3 Literal Interpreting

Literal interpreting, also known as word-for-word interpreting, is a conservative strategy utilized by interpreters when an equivalent term or expression cannot be identified in the target language, particularly when expressions comprise understandable words, for example, "public school" or "summer school". This approach aims to retain as much information as possible while avoiding redundancy. However, this approach has a significant drawback: it may deviate from the original meaning of the source item if the interpreter lacks an understanding of it. For instance, "a two-year college" was interpreted as "两年大学" (two years in the university), the "poor inner-city kids" was rendered as "城市内的贫穷的孩子" (poor kids in the city), distorting the source's intended meaning. As interpreters serve as cultural mediators, facilitating communication between individuals from different cultures, it is preferable for the target audience to comprehend the speaker's message in the same manner as the source audience. Consequently, when interpreting CSIs, a target-culture-oriented principle may be more suitable, as mentioned by one participant. Therefore, if an interpreter chooses to use a literal approach to interpret CSIs, they should bear in mind the acceptability of the interpretation to the target audience and strive for better accuracy.

4.4 Generalizing

Generalizing is a communication strategy that involves the use of general or vague terms to convey information when an interpreter is uncertain about the meaning of an item or when finding an equivalent is difficult. One good example is that "teaching coaches" are translated as "老师 (teachers)", a superordinate term. While it is an appropriate choice, conveying the underlying meaning of a coach would enhance the audience's understanding.

However, over-generalizing should be avoided. Hickie et al. (2003) defined over-generalizing as the situation when people "make a sweeping and exaggerated statement based on limited information or a single event". This can be risky, as it may lead to a lack of clarity, confusion, and a loss of trust in the interpreter by the target audience. In a target speech, the term "teaching coaches" was over-generalized as "大学的工作人员 (university staff)", which is a term covering a broad range of employees working for universities, including academic and supporting staff. Hence, an interpreter must exercise caution while generalizing to maintain clarity and trust with the target audience.

4.5 Contextual Guessing

Contextual guessing is a trainable strategy used by interpreters to unlock the meaning of unknown

words by using existing information in the context (Gaskins, 2004). It involves making an educated guess based on the interpreter's comprehension ability and knowledge base when a culture-specific item is difficult but crucial for conveying the central idea of the sentence. According to previous studies (Paribakht, 2004; Kim, 2005), the guessing skill of an interpreter is a significant contribution to information processing in simultaneous interpreting, and existing knowledge can help increase the accuracy of guessing unfamiliar words for language learners. Advanced learners frequently use background knowledge, the main idea of the context or contextual cues (the unknown expressions' interaction with the rest of the sentence and sentence structure) to guess unknown expressions (Huang & Eslami, 2013). However, a major deficiency of guessing is misleading the target audience if the interpreter incorrectly guesses the source item. For example, “a single mother on government aid” was misinterpreted as “*靠政府的资助来得到教育* (I received education on government aid)”. Therefore, interpreters must strive to understand the context, especially the main purpose of the speaker, to ensure the accuracy of their contextual guessing.

4.6 Omission

As observed in this study, omission, or deletion, is a strategy employed by simultaneous interpreters in two situations, either willingly or unwillingly. Firstly, when a culture-specific term is deemed difficult, but the overall context remains clear without it, interpreters may choose to omit it in order to save time and effort for more important segments. The second type of deletion occurs when interpreters fail to hear or process an item due to limited capacity, a kind of forced behavior.

For example, when interpreting the phrase “a single mother on government aid”, some interpreters retained “single mother” and omitted “on government aid”. They did this because the latter term is uncommon in the target culture, and “single mother” alone sufficiently conveys the concept of a struggling childhood. That is to say, the main idea of the context can still be conveyed with partial deletion. Similarly, “poor inner-city kids” was rendered as “poor kids” with “inner-city” omitted. As interpreters did not correlate the rich and modern city center with poverty, interpreting it as “poor kids” is a conservative way which has not only kept the main idea, but also avoided confusion. In both cases, the main idea of the context was conveyed through deletion while conserving capacity. Thus, deletion is a strategy that can be employed willingly or unwillingly by interpreters, and is a balance between the desired amount of conveyed information and the interpreter's capacity.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored various coping strategies that simultaneous interpreters employ to effectively manage culture-specific items. Through detailed analysis and interviews with professional interpreters, key strategies such as finding equivalents, paraphrasing, literal interpreting, generalizing, contextual guessing, and omission have been identified. These strategies reflect the complex interplay between linguistic proficiency, cognitive load management, and cultural understanding that defines effective interpreting practice. As cultural mediators, interpreters must navigate between preserving the original

message and adapting it to fit the cultural and linguistic context of the target audience. The ability to quickly retrieve equivalent expressions, paraphrase complex ideas, and make educated guesses about unfamiliar terms is crucial in reducing cognitive load while maintaining the fidelity of the message. Moreover, this research highlights the need for comprehensive training programs that equip interpreters with the skills necessary to manage the demands of rendering culture-specific items in simultaneous interpreting. Such programs should focus not only on language enhancement but also on developing an acute awareness of cultural nuances and the ability to apply strategic thinking in real-time interpreting scenarios. In conclusion, the art of simultaneous interpreting extends beyond mere linguistic translation. It is a complex cognitive activity that requires a delicate balance of linguistic agility and cultural sensitivity. By fostering these skills, we can better prepare interpreters to face the challenges of today's linguistically and culturally diverse world.

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