

The Impact of Non-Native English on Omissions in Simultaneous Interpreting

Simultane Çeviride Ana Dil Olmayan İngilizce'nin Atlamalar Üzerindeki Etkisi

Research/Araştırma

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ABSTRACT

Omission is a strategy or technique in interpreting, whether it is made for pragmatic reasons or processing capacity reasons. Following a review of the approaches to omission, this study sets out to explore the impact of a strong, non-native English accent on omission, if any. An experiment has been carried out on senior interpreting students, described below in detail to seek the relation between accent and omission. Moreover, the self-perceptions of interpreting students regarding the speech and their own performance obtained through post-experiment questionnaires and interviews will be discussed. In order to answer the research questions asked below, senior interpreting students' simultaneous interpreting performances of identical texts read with and without a strong non-native English will be compared. After the student performances are analysed with respect to omission, the data will be backed by post-experiment questionnaires and interviews. The other research question is on the types of omissions. Thus, the study will dwell on both whether omissions are made, and if yes, why they are made. The conclusions are hoped to shed light on the use of the strategy of omission in simultaneous interpreting by interpreting students in the case of a strong, non-native accent and to have pedagogical implications besides practical ones.

Keywords: Omission, non-native accent, simultaneous interpreting

ÖZET

Atlama, pragmatik veya işleme kapasitesine ilişkin sebeplere bağlı olarak simultane çeviride kullanılan bir strateji veya tekniktir. Bu konuyla ilgili yaklaşımların gözden geçirilmesinin ardından bu çalışmada ana dil olmayan ve güçlü bir aksanın atlama stratejisi üzerindeki etkisi araştırılacaktır. Aşağıda detaylı olarak anlatıldığı gibi, aksan ile atlama stratejisi arasındaki ilişkiyi ele almak için son sınıf sözlü çeviri öğrencileri üzerinde bir deney gerçekleştirilmiştir. Ayrıca, deney sonrası anket ve görüşmeler yoluyla, sözlü çeviri öğrencilerinin konuşmaya ve kendi performanslarına ilişkin görüşleri de tartışılacaktır. Bu çalışmada sorulan araştırma sorularını cevaplandırmak için, güçlü ve ana dil olmayan bir İngilizce aksanı ile okunan bir metnin çevirileri ile, ana dil aksanı ile okunan benzer bir metnin son sınıf sözlü çeviri öğrencileri tarafından yapılan çevirileri karşılaştırılacaktır. Atlama ile ilgili olarak öğrenci performansları değerlendirildikten sonra, deneyden elde edilen veriler deney sonrası anket ve görüşmelerle desteklenecektir. Çalışmada ele alınan diğer araştırma sorusu da atlamaların türleri üzerinedir. Dolayısıyla çalışmada hem atlamaların kullanılıp kullanılmadığı hem de kullanıldıysa neden kullanıldığı üzerinde durulacaktır. Ortaya çıkan verilerle, güçlü ve ana dil olmayan bir aksan ile karşılaşıldığında sözlü çeviri öğrencileri tarafından simultane çeviride atlama stratejisinin kullanımının detaylı incelenmesi ve hem pratik hem de pedagojik açıdan önemli sonuçlara varılması umulmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Atlama, ana dil olmayan aksan, simultane çeviri

1. Introduction

Omission, described as the incomplete rendition of the source text message, has long been debated in Interpreting Studies. This study, designed as an explorative, descriptive, observational/ experimental study, aims to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1- What is the impact of a strong, non-native accent on the interpreting students' performance in terms of omissions?
- 2- Are omissions conditioned by contextual factors as well as cognitive factors?

An experiment has been carried out on 8 senior interpreting students and post-experiment questionnaires and interviews have been conducted in order to explore the relation between accent and omission. Following a review of the approaches to omission in the literature, the data collection phase consisting of the experiment and post-experiment questionnaires and interviews will be described in detail. The omissions will be categorized in line with Barik's typology (1994) and discussed within the framework of Gile's Effort Models (1995/2009, 1999).

2. Approaches to Omission: A Mistake or a Strategy?

According to Altman (1994), omission is a type of error, rather than a strategy that interpreters resort to, and omission is made due to reasons such as difficulty/delay in processing a preceding text item. In her material collected from interpreting students, Altman did not find any omissions that would cause a communication breakdown,

however, omissions are still perceived as a failure to grasp or process a source text item, constituting an error.

Barik (1994) defines omission as a way to depart from the original version by the interpreter, and as “missing material”, pointing out that an irrelevant repetition or a false start would not be considered an omission. He also adds that only omissions of connectives and fillers such as “well, now, you see” as well as omissions of articles are acceptable since they do not cause a change of meaning in the original text. All other types of omission are regarded as mistakes as they represent a departure from the original. Setton (1999), likewise, defines omissions as “uncorrected speech errors” that “reveal a lapse in self-monitoring due to a distraction from centred attention” (p. 246). Thus, he perceives omission as a mistake rather than a strategy that interpreters might deliberately resort to if and when necessary.

Gile (1995) considers omission as a technique that interpreters use in the case of an external difficulty. These difficulties are listed as “high rate of delivery, high density of the information content, strong accents, and incorrect grammar and lexical usage” (p. 173). Due to the fact that the interpreter cannot comprehend the speech and already works under a mental overload, s/he is forced to leave out parts of the speech. Thus, it is a necessity rather than a deliberate strategy used by the interpreter.

The question that arises then is: Do interpreters omit information only when they have to? As a contribution to the discussion on omission, Pym (2008), with a completely different approach, categorizes omissions as high risk and low risk based on the communicative aim of the speech text. According to Pym (2008), low risk omissions “are part of a general economy of time management, mostly as part of a general strategy of implicitation” (p. 95). “False starts, hesitations, and unnecessary repetitions” are omitted by interpreters to improve the quality of the rendition. However, it is unclear whether a source text item that is implicit in the context but gets omitted is still considered an omission. Thus, the role of context becomes evident in justifying omissions and therefore, “(i)f we are to evaluate omissions, the cognitive dimension requires the contextual” (Pym, 2008, p. 88). Also, interpreters tend to avoid omissions when they can as any significant gap in the rendition can be high risk, and the speaker might be more competent to decide on the communicative risk, since s/he knows more about the context (p. 99). Thus, interpreters might make omissions as a time-saving strategy for pragmatic reasons unless the omitted information is crucial for the purposes of the communicative act. According to Viaggio (2002), who talks about selective listening, what is “irrelevant, redundant, unnecessary, parasitic or incomprehensible” does not need to be translated (p. 9). Thus, interpreters can be selective while listening and interpreting. Another study on omission that makes a distinction between the cognitive approach and the pragmatic approach is Korpál (2012). Accordingly, both students and professionals tend to omit more information when they are confronted with a faster delivery rate. Hence, delivery rate is one of the factors that might influence the strategy of omission. Also, the students and

professionals included in the study took into account the pragmatic aspect of omission and interpreted “only information that was indispensable for the listeners” (Korpala 2012, p. 110). This indicates that they were willing to take responsibility in the interaction and decide what is dispensable and what is not for the target audience.

It is possible that interpreters’ performances are conditioned both by cognitive and contextual factors. More studies on individual factors are needed in order to find out what gets omitted, when, and why. At this point, it would be useful to elaborate on the types of omissions and base the current study on its conceptual and theoretical foundations in line with the research questions listed above.

3. Barik’s Typology of Omissions, Gile’s Effort Models and “Tightrope Hypothesis”

Barik (1994) talks about four types of omission in his typology of omissions, which are skipping omission – omission of a word or phrase which “does not alter the grammatical structure of the sentence and results in a minimal loss in meaning”, comprehension omission – omission that “involves larger units of material, resulting in a definite loss in meaning”, due to failure to understand or interpret part of the text (p. 122). Another type is delay omission, in which part of the source text item is omitted due to a delay in translation. In compounding omission, although some parts are omitted, the gist of the message is retained due to the fact that the interpreter compounds certain units in the source text. These types of omission, or omission techniques, will be used in the present study to categorize omissions.

Gile’s Effort Models describe the complexity of the task of interpreting based on various efforts that constitute the task. According to Gile, the interpreting process consists of three efforts; listening and analysis, production, and short-term memory efforts. Also, a coordination effort is needed in order to coordinate attention between the three efforts. Hence, if interpreters omit something in the source text, it is because of the conflicting Efforts. When too much attention is spared for one effort, other efforts might remain unattended. Besides, according to the “tightrope hypothesis”, interpreters work very close to saturation level. Thus, this hypothesis accounts for “errors and omissions observed in the performance of simultaneous and consecutive interpreters which could not be easily attributed to deficient linguistic abilities, insufficient extralinguistic knowledge or poor conditions in the delivery of the source text” (Gile, 1999, p. 154). Many errors and omissions are due to “interpreters working close to processing capacity saturation” (p. 153) rather than external factors such as those related to the speech itself or the speaker.

The extra cognitive load placed by a strong accent on the interpreter was mentioned with respect to the Efforts. According to Gile (1995):

Bad pronunciation by a non-native speaker forces the interpreter to devote much processing capacity to the Listening and Analysis Effort, and therefore slows down production. This in turn overloads the Memory Effort and results in loss of information from memory. Alternatively, memory is not overloaded, but production becomes very difficult because the interpreter has to accelerate in order to catch up with the speaker, resulting in deterioration of output quality or decreased availability of processing capacity for the Listening and Analysis Effort and the loss of a later segment. (p. 176)

Thus, this study sets out to explore whether a strong accent has an impact on the interpreter's ability to provide a complete rendition. First, however, the possible factors leading to omission will be discussed.

4. Cognitive vs. Contextual Factors

It might be useful at this point to repeat the question: Do interpreters omit information only when they have to? A study by Miriam Shlesinger (2003) examines the rapid forgetting process of unrelated or loosely contextualised items in SI due to working memory limits and the impossibility of rehearsing during SI focusing on the effect of presentation rate on working memory. Loss, or rather, selection of information is explained as follows:

(T)he interpreter's efficiency in prioritizing the incoming information and "deciding" what to retain and what to discard is crucial to adequate performance of the task. [...] (S)trategies – whether norm-driven or idiosyncratic, conscious or automatized, universal or language-specific – may play an important role in the subjects' "decision" to assign low priority to the integrity of the target strings, even when cognitive resources are not being used to capacity and would allow for the retention of a greater number of modifiers. (Shlesinger, 2003, p. 44)

The author emphasizes the "decision" of the interpreter on what to keep or what to omit and mentions the use of strategies that can be *conscious* (emphasis added) or automatized to prioritize certain items in the source text. Thus, the interpreter might deliberately choose to remove redundant information from the target output.

Setton (2006) claims that simultaneous interpreters rely heavily on accessible contexts; i.e., immediate and extended contexts, to adjust their cognitive environment to that of the receptors in order to create the same cognitive effects as the source input. Accordingly, it is possible to "identify elements in the interpreter's production which come from more extended contexts", i.e., which are not present in the immediate contexts (Setton, 2006, p. 386). If the broader context is effective in adding information, then the role of this contextual dimension might as well be considered in removing information from the source text.

With a focus on working memory and attention, Cowan (2000) discusses the types of information used in interpreting and states that beyond the chunk of

information to be translated, there is also “information about the larger context of what the speaker has been saying, which may influence the way in which the ongoing speech is interpreted” (2000, p. 136).

The omissions in Barik’s typology described in Section 3 are all motivated by cognitive factors and are made because the interpreter cannot avoid them. However, in line with the discussion in Section 2 and above in this section, omissions might as well be motivated by contextual factors. The information in the source text might be implicit in the context and might not be interpreted by the interpreter as it is deemed as obvious, redundant, repetitive, or irrelevant. Omissions related to contextual factors are more deliberate than omissions related to cognitive factors and involve the selective removing of redundant information by the interpreter.

Thus, we will try to find out through our data whether context has an effect on omissions in simultaneous interpreting in addition to processing capacity. Despite the fact that we can only assume interpreters’ reasons for omitting based on the analysis of recordings of their renditions, through post-experiment interviews, it will be possible to ask and confirm the reasons underlying their omissions.

5. Experiment

5.1. Aim

As mentioned above in the introduction, the study set out to explore the impact of non-native accent on interpreting performance in terms of omissions. Another objective was to elicit the self-perceptions of the students regarding the task of interpreting, the challenges they encountered, their own performance and their omissions. The third objective was to find out through the recordings of students’ renditions and post-experiment interviews whether contextual factors besides cognitive factors can also be the reason underlying omissions in simultaneous interpreting. Thus, we will delve not only into what gets omitted, but also why.

5.2. Material

The material consisted of a speech text – taken from an actual conference presentation on climate change – consisting of 1565 words. The speech text had a popular theme and required no specialized knowledge. The vocabulary profiling of the text was made in order to ensure that it was not difficult for the students. A vocabulary list consisting of the possible unfamiliar terms that were few in number was provided before the experiment so that the variable of vocabulary is removed. As there is a risk that the two segments of the speech text might have different levels of difficulty, they were sent to four professional interpreters, counterbalancing the order of segments across the interpreters – starting with the first segment to two interpreters and with the second segment to the other two – after introductory and concluding remarks

have been removed¹. In their assessment on the difficulty of the speech segments, all four professional interpreters stated that both segments of the source text were equally difficult.

The text was read by a native speaker (North American) and a non-native speaker (West African) with a strong accent. The West African accent² was chosen due to its strong and unique nature. Audio recordings of the two versions were obtained. The native speaker read the text in 13 minutes 12 seconds (120 words per minute) whereas the non-native speaker read it in 14 minutes 45 seconds (111 words per minute). Thus, the delivery rate of the two speakers was proximate.

5.3. Participants

The participants included in the experiment were eight senior students from Dokuz Eylul University Department of Translation and Interpreting. These students passed the aptitude test made at the beginning of their final year and had two semesters' experience with simultaneous interpreting. Five of them work between Turkish and English whereas three of them work between Turkish, English, and German. All of them have Turkish as A language, English as B language, and German as either B or C language. They attended an advanced English – Turkish simultaneous interpreting class run by the author of this study.

5.4. Method

The students were told that they would be asked to interpret a speech around 14 minutes on climate change from English into Turkish. They were also informed that there would be a change of speakers in the middle of the speech, however the objective of the study was not explained.

The experiment was conducted at the standard, soundproof booths at the simultaneous interpreting laboratory at Dokuz Eylul University, Department of Translation and Interpreting. The source text was divided into two parts. The students first interpreted the part read by the native speaker and then they interpreted the part read by the non-native speaker. The performance of the students was recorded and then transcribed. The students were given short post-experiment questionnaires right after the interpreting task asking them to evaluate the speeches in terms of accent and delivery rate of the speakers and terminology and complexity of the text. Then post-experiment interviews were conducted in order to explore the self-perceptions of the students regarding the speech, the accent factor, and their own performances. They were also asked whether they used omission as a strategy, and if yes why.

¹ The design of an experiment on the effects of presentation rate on working memory by Shlesinger (2003) was taken as a departure point. In this study, segments of text were read in a different order across subjects.

² The coexistence of English as an intonational language with West African indigenous languages which are mostly tonal led to a West African accent (Udofot 2015).

6. Results

6.1. Interpreting Performance

In order to evaluate the students’ performance in terms of omissions, the text was divided into propositions in the form of coherent and comprehensible groups of words and phrases that make sense. Most propositions consisted of a single sentence whereas some included sub-propositions that correspond to longer sentences. All in all, the text consisted of 95 propositions. The first part of the text included 47 propositions and the second part of the text included 48 propositions. The transcriptions were compared with the propositions in the source text in search for the effect of accent on omissions.

In the tables below, the number of omissions by each student is indicated in the two parts of the speech respectively. The types of omission include Barik’s four types. Barik’s typology is based on various criteria, which are the interpreter’s possible reasons for omitting (not understanding a source text item, “bypassing” what was said in order to catch up, regrouping the source text items, and the audience’s evaluation of what is unimportant depending on what gets omitted in the end). The total number of omissions related to cognitive factors in Part 1 and Part 2 are given in Table 1 and Table 3. The omissions that do not fit into any of these types are categorized separately as omissions related to contextual factors in Table 2 and Table 4. Students are shown with the letter S (S1, S2 etc.).

Table 1. Omissions related to cognitive factors in Part 1.

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Skipping	1	-	2	2	1	1	-	3
Comprehension	-	2	1	2	3	1	-	1
Delay	3	3	4	3	4	3	2	2
Compounding	2	1	1	1	1	1	-	-
Total	6	6	8	8	9	6	2	6

Table 2. Omissions related to contextual factors in Part 1.

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Contextual	-	2	1	-	1	1	-	-

Table 3. Omissions related to cognitive factors in Part 2.

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Skipping	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-
Comprehension	11	6	13	17	6	5	9	4
Delay	3	2	5	2	2	2	4	2
Compounding	-	4	1	-	-	2	-	2
Total	15	12	19	19	9	10	13	8

Table 4. Omissions related to contextual factors in Part 2.

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Contextual	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1

As seen above, omissions related to cognitive factors made in the second part of the speech (Table 3) are significantly higher compared to those in the first part of the speech (Table 1). There is a visible difference also between the types of omissions. Delay omissions seem to be more common in the first part, possibly due to the delivery speed, although not confessed by the students themselves below (6.2., 6.3.). However, comprehension omissions outnumber the other types in the second part. Omissions related to contextual factors, although not many in number, are observed more frequently in the first part of the speech, as redundancy could only be established when comprehension is not affected.

6.2. Post-Experiment Questionnaires

In terms of terminology and complexity, the text was considered fairly easy (3) or manageable (4) by most of the students. Only one student characterized the text as difficult. The accent and intonation of the second speaker might have affected the students' perception of the difficulty of the text. The delivery speed of the first speaker was not considered difficult to cope with. However, the delivery speed of the second speaker was deemed as difficult to cope with although the second speaker was even slightly slower compared to the first. Clearly in this case, the non-native accent of the second speaker has affected the students' perceptions of the delivery rate, which is an interesting and unexpected finding. Regarding accent, all students agreed that the accent of the first speaker was not difficult to cope with. They also all agreed that the accent of the second speaker was difficult to cope with. Details such as challenges and handling strategies were discussed in the post-experiment interviews.

6.3. Post-Experiment Interviews

During the post-experiment interviews, the students were asked about the difficulties they had encountered while interpreting, how they handled these difficulties, whether they developed any coping strategies, whether they made omissions, and if yes why.

The answers revealed that the accent, intonation, pronunciation as well as emphasis and stress of the second speaker were very difficult to cope with. Six out of eight subjects stated that the second part of the speech simply could not be understood. Two of them mentioned that the delivery speed in the second part was challenging too, as mentioned above in the discussion of the answers to the post-experiment questionnaires. However, three students emphasized that it is not the delivery speed that they could not handle, but that the speech was incomprehensible due to accent. Only one student stated that the delivery speed in the first part of the

speech was high too. No other student mentioned a difficulty regarding the first part of the speech.

Regarding the questions on omission, the students stated that the main reason of their omissions was lack of understanding of the source text. As analysed above with respect to interpreting performance, as non-native accent and intonation put an extra load on their cognitive processes, they had to make omissions in order to catch up with the speaker. When asked specifically, four out of eight students stated that they made omissions due to contextual factors, i.e., they made omissions intentionally in order to remove redundant information or to give the essence of a longer phrase, the key point being removal of information intentionally. Thus, omission was used as a strategy not only to reduce cognitive load and allocate cognitive resources to the Efforts other than the Listening and Analysis Effort, but also to exclude contextually redundant/ irrelevant information for pragmatic reasons such as saving time. This points to the willingness of the interpreters to take an active role and assume responsibility in the interaction as to what is crucial and what is dispensable for the purposes of the communicative act.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the experiment, post-experiment questionnaires, and post-experiment interviews, the following conclusions became clear as answers to the research questions stated in the introduction to the study:

1- A strong non-native accent has an impact on the interpreting students' performance in terms of omissions. As seen in Section 6.1. Table 1 and Table 3, non-native accent significantly increases the number of omissions, related to cognitive factors, made while interpreting the source speech. In addition, it was observed that comprehension omissions in Part 2 are much higher both compared to the other types of omissions in Part 2 and compared to the comprehension omissions in Part 1. Hence, the loss of information was considerably higher while interpreting the non-native speaker due to a clear lack of understanding on the interpreters' part. As regards the self-perceptions of interpreting students regarding the speech, the accent factor, and their own performances mainly in terms of omitting source text items, although the speech text itself is not considered difficult as such, the second part of the speech was considered difficult to handle. In terms of the challenges, the students mentioned not only accent, but also intonation, pronunciation, emphasis, and stress. Moreover, the delivery speed in the second part was deemed as higher in the second part of the speech although it was slightly higher in the first part.

2- As confirmed by the students in the post-experiment interviews, omissions were also made due to contextual factors besides cognitive factors. Although few in number, the students stated that some of their omissions were intentional.

They were due to pragmatic reasons such as saving time or contextual reasons such as redundancy or repetition. They did not find it necessary to interpret everything that is implicit in the context. Thus, it is not only the cognitive resources overly allocated to Listening and Analysis Effort that underlie omissions, but also context. Interpreters do not omit information just because they have to, but they might deliberately decide on what to render based on their judgment of what is necessary and what is not.

Omission can well be made as a contextual decision and it can be viewed from this perspective as well. Moreover, these findings also have some pedagogical implications. Interpreter training programs should definitely focus on listening comprehension as a skill. Besides, interpreting students should be familiarized with various non-native accents as non-native speakers commonly use English in conferences and this seems to be valid for the interpreters in the Turkish context for the foreseeable future. SCIC speech repository and recently Boğaziçi Interpreting Resource Database – a YouTube channel consisting of speeches to be used for simultaneous and consecutive interpreting practice – are valuable resources for practising interpreting with speeches of various accents and levels of difficulty. Thus, interpreting students should be well equipped to tackle challenges such as non-native accent since they are expected to take on a very demanding task usually under circumstances far from the ideal.

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