

The effect of conference interpreting training on bilingual word production

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Conference interpreters form a special group of bilinguals since their simultaneous interpretation practice requires very specific processing of two languages. Word comprehension and production in respective languages is performed under strict time constraints. The interpreter is constantly in the bilingual language mode (Grosjean 2000) with activated comprehension of both languages (source language – to listen to the input to be interpreted, target language – to listen to the interpreter's own output for self-monitoring), activated production of the target language and suppressed production of the source language (see also Christoffels and de Groot 2005). Such a constant exposure to information processing tasks involving two languages influences the structure of the mental lexicon. De Groot and Christoffels posit the existence of direct connections between translation equivalent words due to their frequent co-occurrence in the environment (2006). Similarly, Francis points to at least partly shared semantic representation of translation equivalents (2005).

Conference interpreting scholars have long advocated the involvement of psycholinguistic methodology in empirical research involving professional interpreters or trainees as participants, which can generate a synergy effect for both fields of study (Moser-Mercer 1997, Gile 1994). The research involving interpreters has brought varying results so far. Christoffels found that faster reaction times in a word retrieval task could be associated with better interpretation performance (2004). On the other hand, in a different study interpreters did not outperform language teachers in word retrieval (Christoffels, De Groot and Kroll 2006), which led to a conclusion that word retrieval was not enhanced by the conference interpreting experience. These results are at a variance with the findings by Bajo et al. (2000), who discovered that interpreters outperformed other non-interpreting professionals with good second language command in such tasks as comprehension, lexical decision, categorization and suppression, thus suggesting that the interpreters' training and experience increases efficient lexical and semantic access.

An experimental study was devised to reconcile the above data and to shed more light on the effect of conference interpreting training on bilingual word production. Students participating in graduate-level conference interpreting programmes were selected as the experimental group. The control group included non-interpreting bilinguals matched for language competence, age and education. Since words in interpretation are processed in context and since context has been shown to influence processing (van Hell 2005), experimental words matched for frequency, concreteness and length were included in the final position of sentences with high or low context constraint judged in a sentence context norming study. In an on-line processing experiment, the participants were asked to translate words appearing on the computer screen following a sentence context and the reaction times were measured by means of a voice key.

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