

Does the direction of interpreting influence the interpreter's mental lexicon?

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Professional interpreters employed by international institutions such as the European Commission or the European Parliament usually work into their mother tongue (also known as A language) from their passive (C) languages. However, due to various language regimes and/or a specific character of a local interpreting market in a given country, some interpreters are required to work in a retour mode, i.e. interpret from their A language into the so-called active foreign language (known as B language). A study was devised to see if the long-term interpreting unilateral practice (i.e. into A language only), in contrast to bilateral practice (i.e. into A and into B language), influences the speed of lexical access and the strength of interlingual lexical links.

The participants of the study included 48 professional conference interpreters with Polish as their A language and English as their B language comprising two groups: 24 unidirectional interpreters working predominantly into their A language (employed by the European Union interpreting services) and 24 interpreters working both into and from their A language (working as freelance interpreters on the Polish market). The study involved verbal production of translation equivalents (in their A and B language) under three sentence context constraints – no context, high context constraint and low context constraint. Translation latencies were measured and compared to test if and to what extent interpreting directionality dominance influences the production of translation equivalents. It was hypothesised that unidirectional interpreters would manifest directionality asymmetry and have shorter translation latencies in the B-to-A direction as opposed to A-to-B direction, while bidirectional interpreters would manifest no such asymmetry. The study found no hypothesised asymmetry in translation latencies for the unidirectional group of interpreters thus showing that interpreting directionality dominance has no impact on the strength of interlingual lexical links in the interpreter's mental lexicon or that other factors (e.g. language use, bi/multilingual profile, word frequency and exposure) might offset any such impact. The results will be discussed in the context of the Revised Hierarchical Model (Kroll and Stewart 1994).

References

Kroll, J.F. and Stewart, E. 1994. "Category interference in translation and picture naming: Evidence for asymmetric connections between bilingual memory representations", *Journal of Memory and Language* 33: 149-174.