Interpreting Quality: A Case Study of Spontaneous Reactions

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Abstract/Résumé
Les réactions spontanées de 22 informateurs à des enregistrements d’interprétations en direct du discours inaugural du président Obama vers le français ont été recueillies, étudiées et comparées. Les évaluations font apparaître une grande variabilité interindividuelle dans les évaluations, et notamment des cas où certains font des commentaires positifs et d’autres des commentaires négatifs sur les mêmes paramètres de qualité pour les mêmes interprètes. Les commentaires sur la forme ont été plus nombreux que les commentaires sur le fond. De nombreux commentaires montrent que pour les informateurs, les interprètes sont des acteurs ayant une présence propre qui est parfois en concurrence avec celle de l’orateur. L’intonation s’est avérée être un paramètre de qualité important, contrairement à l’appariement de la voix masculine de l’orateur avec une voix masculine d’interprète et la directionnalité.

Keywords/Mots-Clés
Interpreting quality, spontaneous reactions, quality parameters, intonation, role

I. Introduction

Interpreting quality is one of the most intensively researched topics in conference interpreting, and one on which, besides conceptual analyses (e.g. AIIC, 1982; Cartellieri, 1983; Seleskovich, 1986; Déjean Le Féal, 1990; Viezzi, 1993; Shlesinger, 1997; Kahane, 2000; Kalina, 2001; Grbić, 2008), a large number of empirical studies have been conducted, from the 1980s on (references are given later in this paper). AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, which was set up in 1953 with a view to set standards, talked about interpreting quality as “that elusive something” that “no one can define” as late as 1982 (AIIC, 1982:1). For research purposes, this was not enough. In a general methodological proposal for empirical investigation, Gile (1983) referred to two aspects of interpreting quality, namely ‘informational fidelity’ and ‘presentation’, which, he assumed, would be assessed with some variability depending on the assessors and the circumstances. Other researchers developed these ideas further along the same
axis. More specifically, they conceptualized both ‘informational fidelity’ and ‘presentation’ in terms of quality components such as accent, voice, fluency of delivery, logical cohesion, sense consistency, completeness, correct grammar, correct terminology, and set out to measure their relative importance as perceived by different categories of users of interpreting services. The first main thrust of this research axis focused on user expectations, starting with Büllher 1986 and following on with Kurz (e.g. 1989, 2001) and others (e.g. Moser, 1996). One problem with expectation surveys, pointed out in Gile (1990), was that the validity of statements on expectations as indicators of the relative weight of actual quality perception was uncertain. Hence the requirement to study actual quality perception. Gile (1990) was a simple case study, and it was followed by many larger and more sophisticated studies by other investigators. One group which deserves special attention in this respect is ECIS, a group of researchers from the University of Granada, Spain (http://ecis.ugr.es/), led by Ángela Collados Aís. ECIS has produced a number of doctoral dissertations which looked at both the expectations and the reactions of users to interpretations in which various quality components were manipulated. Among the findings of the group, three are of particular interest: one is that when asked about quality components by name (e.g. “intonation”), users tend not to have a clear idea of what is referred to. Another is that when the quality of single quality components are lowered by manipulation, the assessors’ ratings of other components and of the overall quality of the interpretation tends to drop as well. Finally, manipulation of form-related quality components seems to have a stronger effect than is suggested by quality expectation surveys, which found substance-related components to be rated as more important (see Collados Aís et al., 2003; Collados Aís et al., 2011; García Becerra et al., 2013).

If expectation surveys turn out to be less reliable than quality perception studies and if pre-determined categories are not necessarily a reliable tool when seeking to determine their relative weights among groups of users of interpreting services, it makes sense to also ask whether other quality components or expectations have been missed due to the particular methodological decisions made in existing research. Hence the idea to experiment with spontaneous reactions of users without directing them towards particular quality components. Such a study was conducted by Chevalier for her M.A. degree (Chevalier, 2013), a step towards her doctoral dissertation. At that stage, preliminary explorations were conducted with various speech segments of different lengths, with available participants and with subjective