

Omission in simultaneous interpreting as a deliberate act

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Omission in interpreting, understood as an incomplete rendition of the information present in the source language, has long been a contentious issue. Altman (1994), Barik (1994), Gile (1995; 1999) as well as Setton (1999) have perceived omission in simultaneous interpreting either as a mistake or as a technique that interpreters may use only in extremely difficult conditions, when experiencing cognitive overload. Nevertheless, Viaggio (2002), Visson (2005) and Pym (2008) draw attention to the pragmatic approach to omission, treating it as a conscious decision made by the interpreter rather than a mistake resulting from miscomprehension. The main purpose of the study is to check whether both interpreting trainees and professional interpreters are sensitive to the pragmatic aspect of omissions. We ask whether they tend to use deliberate omission in a real interpreting task in order to eliminate message redundancy or whether they stick to the original, despite repetitions, digressions and unnecessary information contained in the text. The results of the study may shed new light on the issue of omission in simultaneous interpreting.¹

Key words: omission, pragmatics of interpreting, interpreting quality.

The contentious character of omission in interpreting: literature review

A great many articles in the field of Interpreting Studies have been devoted to the thorny issue of quality. The classification of errors differs from one researcher to another and hence appears to result from subjective observation

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rather than objective dogma. Nevertheless, when judging the quality of a rendition, omissions have often been perceived as a mistake resulting from non-comprehension. Altman (1994: 28f.) enumerates the instances of omission, all of them leading either to loss information or at least a slight change of meaning. According to Barik (1994: 124), the only accepted instances of omission are those of connectives, empty fillers and hedges (such as *well, you see*) as well as articles; any other types of omission are perceived as being a mistake and are never to be used when interpreting. A similar perception of omission as a mistake may be observed in Setton (1999), who defines omissions as “uncorrected speech errors” that “reveal a lapse in self-monitoring due to a distraction from centered attention” (Setton 1999: 246).

Omission has also been treated by some researchers as a technique that an interpreter may resort to only when forced by some external difficulty. Gile (1995: 173) discusses “high rate of delivery”, “high density of the information content” as well as “strong accents” and “incorrect grammar and lexical usage” as examples of situations that may jeopardize the interpreter’s ability to give a complete rendition. If interpreters cannot decipher what has been said by the speaker, they will be forced to condense the speech and omit certain information. This is, however, not considered to be a deliberate act by the interpreter, who might have judged some parts of speech as redundant, but as a necessity resulting from the incomprehensibility of the speech and the overwhelming mental overload that the interpreter thus experiences.

The multitasking of simultaneous interpreting and the complexity of mental operations involved have been represented in Gile’s Effort Models, which, apart from describing the process itself, aim to account for “errors and omissions observed in the performance of simultaneous and consecutive interpreters which could not be easily attributed to deficient linguistic abilities, insufficient extra-linguistic knowledge or poor conditions in the delivery of the source text” (Gile 1999: 154). Hence Gile focuses on those errors and omissions that stem from the complex character of the interpreting task, which forces the interpreter to work near or just below the saturation level. The “tightrope hypothesis” (Gile 1999: 159) metaphorically presents the mental overload to which an interpreter is exposed. Similar to tightrope walkers who have to control their bodies, the interpreter needs to coordinate all the efforts in order to give a successful rendition. Gile claims that if the interpreter works well below saturation level, the only reason for the occurrence of errors and omissions will be the complexity of the source speech itself. When, however, no such objective difficulties of the speech exist, this would imply that the errors and omissions stem from the complex character of the mental operations involved in the interpreting task. What appears to be questionable, however, is that these two are the only reasons for the interpreter to omit some segments during the interpreting task. The

question arises: Is it possible for an interpreter to omit certain information deliberately due to the fact that some segments have been assessed as redundant or dispensable because they are implicitly present in the discourse? Do omissions necessarily indicate lesser quality?

The question of pragmatics of simultaneous interpreting and the implicitness of certain information in the discourse has been addressed by Pym (2008). He makes a distinction between low-risk and high-risk omissions, claiming that the former are “part of a general economy of time management” (Pym 2008: 95). In this way, Pym questions the notion that non-omission is always desirable and maintains that some omissions “can be made without jeopardizing the fundamental aims of the communication act” (Pym 2008: 93). Hence, it is possible (and sometimes even advisable) for an interpreter to deliberately omit certain elements of the source speech for pragmatic reasons: in order to make the rendition more concise and coherent, devoid of superfluous digressions and message redundancy, as well as to dispose of information that is implicitly present in the speech and, thus, irrelevant for the delegates. Viaggio (2002: 239) also states that everything that is redundant, irrelevant, parasitic or incomprehensible should not be interpreted. Visson (2005) has also discussed omission as a condensation technique that makes the interpretation more coherent.

The discrepancy between the cognitive and pragmatic approaches to omission presents didactic problems, since it does not answer the question whether the use of omission and condensation techniques is desirable in order to reduce superfluous information in a source speech, or whether interpreters should always stick to the original. The pragmatic approach appears to shed new light on the issue of quality. It purports that the interpreter’s decision not to include certain elements does not necessarily stem from the mental overload depicted in the tightrope hypothesis. The theory, nevertheless, is one thing and the actual behaviour of interpreters is another. We have thus sought to set up an experiment to test the performance of both interpreting trainees and professional interpreters in this respect.

The purpose of the study

The aim of the experiment was to investigate the participants’ actual behaviour concerning the use of omissions in a real interpreting task. The experiment made it possible to examine the behaviour of both the interpreting trainees as well as professional interpreters.

Participants

The participants in the study were eleven conference-interpreting trainees at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, and six university graduates who work as professional conference interpreters (with a minimum of one year's experience). All the trainees had completed at least eight months of the conference interpreting course with English as a B language. Their performance was later compared to the renditions given by the group of professional interpreters, many of them supervising the interpreting course at Adam Mickiewicz University. All the participants were of Polish origin.

Materials

The materials used in the study consisted of the recordings of two speeches in English found on the Internet, similar in terms of their topic as well as syntactic complexity (Automated Readability Index - Text 1: ARI=5.89; Text 2: ARI=5.20), both of them prepared by the author and recorded by a native speaker of English (General American). The preparation of the texts comprised the addition of many digressions, hedges, discourse markers, cultural allusions and message redundancy. Both speeches were prepared in two delivery speeds using Audacity software in order to investigate if delivery rate is a factor contributing to the number of instances of omissions made. The length of both versions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Delivery-speed versions of the texts

	<i>Fast</i>	<i>Slow</i>
Text 1	2 min 48 sec (177 words/min)	3 min 48 sec (130 words/min)
Text 2	2 min 51 sec (180 words/min)	3 min 56 sec (130 words/min)

Procedure and hypotheses

Each participant was asked to interpret simultaneously two speeches, different in delivery rate, from their B language (English) into their A language (Polish). In order to avoid any confounding variables in the analysis, the order of presentation of the texts, as well as whether the first text constituted the slow or the fast version of the original text, were counterbalanced across the participants. The experiment was carried out in the professional simultaneous interpreting booths at the School of English at Adam Mickiewicz University. To guarantee the ecological validity of the experiment, before the task each participant was presented with the context

for the original English speeches. The participants were asked to imagine they were interpreting for an audience at an international conference. The interpretations were recorded. After each rendition the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire, which was then coded by the author.

In order to evaluate the performance of the participants, 19 areas of interest were selected. These constituted parts of the texts that were, in our opinion, likely to be omitted by the interpreters in order to make the text more comprehensible. The areas of interest were further divided into five groups (examples given in italics):

- (1) Repetitions of exactly the same words (7 out of 19):
 - *Anyway, he persuaded me to write this book. [...] Yeah, so he persuaded me to write this book.*
 - *I've received hundreds and hundreds of e-mails, phone calls. [...] Hundreds of e-mails.*
 - *I was thirty-five. [...] I was thirty-five then.*
- (2) Redundancies (4 out of 19):
 - *Ok, I forgot what I was talking about.*
 - *In the book it's about eight pages in the whole book out of – **give me 5 seconds to check it** – 321 pages.*
- (3) Cultural allusions (2 out of 19):
 - *A typical political book, such as one of the Andrew Young's political books.*
 - *I feel like on Jerry Springer's!*
- (4) Empty fillers/discourse markers (5 out of 19):
 - *How shall I put it...*
 - *Let's concentrate on that for a moment.*
 - *I know I'm repeating myself now.*
- (5) Speaker's subjective assessment (1 out of 19):
 - *The book is really exciting!*

Both texts contained the identical number of the areas of interest, representing the groups mentioned above. Having enumerated these elements, we could analyze the interpreters' performance quantitatively, which then gave a chance to implement statistical analysis. The results were collected by means of the zero-one method, which means that we coded whether a certain part of the original speech was omitted by a particular interpreter or not.

After each performance the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire. This concerned possible reasons for omissions. The

questionnaire comprised 17 questions, the first seven of which related to the participants' general opinion of omission in simultaneous interpreting. The remaining ten questions concerned the participants' subjective impressions of the interpreting task they had performed.

Our hypotheses are as follows:

1. There exists a positive correlation between the delivery rate and the number of omissions made. In the case of slow delivery, when interpreters do not work close to saturation level, the omission of redundant information stems from pragmatic reasons. The fast delivery rate would encourage the participants to omit even more redundancies, so as to save their mental energy.
2. Both experiment groups differ significantly in terms of the use of omission and they do not share the same view regarding this technique. With the slow delivery rate, students will have a tendency to stick to the original, whereas professionals, being more experienced, will omit redundant information from the source speech.

The impact of delivery rate: the results of intra-group comparisons

In order to investigate the influence of the delivery rate on the number of omissions made by the interpreters, we made two intra-group comparisons: one for the group of students and another for the group of professionals.

In the group of interpreting trainees we found a positive correlation between delivery speed and number of omissions. The results of the paired samples t-test show that there was a statistically significant difference in the scores for the number of omissions in a slow delivery rate condition ($M = 8.09$; $SD = 3.21$) and a high delivery rate condition ($M = 10.36$; $SD = 2.91$); $t(10) = -3.125$, $p = .01$). Out of the total number of elements in the 19 areas of interest, students omitted on average 8.09 elements when interpreting the slower speech, whereas in the fast delivery rate condition they omitted on average 10.36 elements. What is worth mentioning is the number of high standard deviations. Some students were prone to omit a great deal of redundant information, whereas the other tended to interpret them.

In the group of professional conference interpreters, on the other hand, there was no statistically significant difference in the scores for the number of omissions in a slow delivery rate condition ($M = 7.00$; $SD = 3.27$) and a high delivery rate condition ($M = 9.00$; $SD = 4.10$); $t(5) = -1.615$, $p = .17$ (paired samples t-test). The standard deviations with both slow and fast delivery speeds are even higher than in the case of the interpreting trainees.

While the comparison of the means suggests that there exists a correlation between the delivery rate and the number of omissions made by the professionals, the small number of participants and the very high standard deviation make this difference statistically non-significant.

The result of inter-group comparison

We asked whether there was a significant difference between the two groups with regard to the use of omission, irrespective of the speaker's delivery rate. The results of the independent samples t-test show that there was no statistically significant difference in the scores for the number of omissions between interpreting trainees ($M = 18.45$; $SD = 5.63$) and professionals ($M = 16.00$; $SD = 6.78$); $t(15) = .801$, $p = .44$.

These results appear to be surprising, since one could expect a discrepancy between the students who lack experience in simultaneous interpretation and professionals whose experience has shaped their behaviour in the booth. It was hypothesized that for the slow delivery rate, when the interpreters do not have to work close to saturation level, students would tend to stick to the original and they would lack the ability to select the information that is indispensable for the listeners. This hypothesis, nevertheless, was not corroborated in the study, and the inter-group difference turned out to be statistically non-significant not only in the fast delivery rate condition ($p = .44$) but also in the slow delivery rate condition ($p = .51$).

The results of the questionnaire

The questionnaire used a seven-point Likert scale with 1 meaning strong disagreement and 7 indicating strong agreement with a particular statement. The answers to the first seven questions showed whether participants generally accepted omitting elements for pragmatic reasons. Both groups turned out to accept omission in SI as a deliberate act. The comparison of the results in the group of trainees ($M = 5.34$; $SD = .41$) and professionals ($M = 5.00$; $SD = .55$); $t(15) = 1.446$, $p = .17$ (independent samples t-test) does not give any statistically significant difference. Interestingly enough, despite the experience gap, both groups share the same view and are aware that there exist situations in which interpreters are allowed to, or even should, omit certain information from the original speech.

The remaining part of the questionnaire consisted of two sets of five questions, each devoted to one of the texts interpreted. We investigated the participants why they omitted certain elements. A score of 7 meant they were using omission purely for pragmatic reasons; a score of 1, on the other

hand, would suggest that the instances of omissions stemmed mainly from the complexity of a task that took all of the participant's mental energy. Again, the results of the independent samples t-test show that there was no statistically significant difference in the scores between interpreting trainees ($M = 4.05$; $SD = .75$) and professionals ($M = 4.31$; $SD = .62$); $t(15) = -.723$, $p = .48$. After the interpreting task, many participants from both experimental groups claimed that the speeches were so disorderly that they felt they needed to make them more organized. A great many professionals and interpreting trainees said that they had the impression that they should have omitted some information to make the speeches more communicative. Some of them reported that, while interpreting the fast speaker, failure to omit redundancies would have made it impossible for them to interpret the more crucial elements.

Discussion and further research

Consistent with our predictions (hypothesis 1), we found a positive correlation between delivery rate and number of omissions in the case of the interpreting trainees. Comparison of the means makes it clear that the professionals also omitted more information with the fast delivery rate, although to deem the result statistically significant more participants are needed. As for the interpretation of the results in the group of trainees, they tend to feel the need to omit redundancies in the case of the slow delivery rate. When confronted with the faster delivery rate, they omitted even more information, since the speed of delivery encouraged them to interpret only information that was indispensable for the listeners. Nevertheless, their renditions of the faster text lacked certain informative elements, as the task took up much of their mental energy. Similar to the students, professionals are in general sensitive to the pragmatic aspect of omissions. The fact that they omitted less informative information while interpreting the fast speaker indicates that their experience made them more skilful and they had fewer problems when working with the fast delivery.

However, if we disregard the delivery rate variable, it turns out that there is no statistically significant difference in the number of omissions made by the experiment groups. Furthermore, the evaluation of the questionnaire shows that the opinions on the use of omission do not vary greatly between the groups either. Hence, our second hypothesis failed to be corroborated. This seems surprising, as one could think that the experience gap would mirror the difference in the subjective views of the groups.

Interesting as these results could be, we are fully aware that, due to small number of participants, the analysis offers only tentative insight in the issue of omissions. A larger number of participants would give the study more external validity, which could change the results of the experiment.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, our surprising results may shed new light on the issue.

As for our further research, the study could be extended to include consecutive interpreting. In this case, the tendency to omit even more redundant information is expected. The comparison of the two interpreting modes with respect to omission would make it possible to formulate some general conclusions about the nature of the two modes. Furthermore, we could see if there exists any correlation between our particular areas of interest and the likelihood that elements are omitted. The issue of omission in interpreting has so far been dealt with only sufficiently; there is still much to investigate.

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