

## RESEARCH ON INTERPRETING BY STUDENTS AT SSLIMIT, UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA (ITALY)

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1. Background
- 1.1 The importance of theses in interpreting research

Pöchhacker's (1995) bibliography of writings and research on interpreting from 1989 to 1994, covering a total of 627 bibliographic items, attributes more than 10% of overall output to unpublished theses and dissertations.<sup>1</sup> While the contribution of doctoral and post-doctoral dissertations is quantitatively small (less than 2% of total production), theses submitted for a Master's qualification (or, in some cases, a first degree) account for 60 items (almost 10%). This figure, a considerable increase on the six Master's theses completed during the previous three and a half decades (Pöchhacker 1995: 20, 25), is probably lower than the actual total. The reason is that universities do not always disseminate information on theses (Gile 2000: 314), making it difficult to carry out an exhaustive survey.

Gile (2000: 318) highlights the growth in the combined output of the five countries contributing most theses from the 70s (17 theses) to the 90s (175 theses). A clear trend in the countries concerned is the growing proportion of theses reporting empirical studies – 65 out of 175 theses (37%) during the 90s, as opposed to 2 out of 17 (12%) in the 70s (Gile 2000: 318).

Authors of degree theses rarely have any further involvement in interpreting research after graduation (Pöchhacker 1995: 21), and hardly any have so far gone on to complete a doctorate (Gile 2000: 302). However, the “one-off” nature of most theses does not reflect on their *quality*, which is in some cases very high (Gile 1995: 22). Gran and Viezzi's (1995: 115) account of research into interpreting at the University of Trieste emphasises that theses are not only an important learning experience for undergraduates, but also contribute to development of institutional research.

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1 Consistent with the terminology used by Pöchhacker (1995) and Gile (2000), the term “dissertation” is applied here to work for a doctorate or post-doctoral qualification, while a “thesis” is considered to have been submitted at graduation or Master's level.

## 1.2 Interpreter training and related research at the University of Bologna

Available figures show the highest national total of graduation theses during the 90s to have been 35, in Italy (Gile 2000). This figure actually represents the combined output of just two universities – Trieste and Bologna.

Against this background, the following brief account focuses on the contribution of graduation theses to interpreting research at the University of Bologna. No reference is made to publications by academic staff, which are beyond the scope of this survey.

Before the University of Bologna opened its School of Interpreting and Translation at Forlì in 1990, the only Italian university to award degrees in these disciplines was Trieste. About 800 students currently attend the School at Forlì (the intake being about 170 per year), and over 40 staff have tenure (including a number of interpreting specialists). Professional interpreters and translators also make a vital contribution, both as teachers and as examiners. In 1999, Forlì became part of the *Conférence Internationale d'Instituts Universitaires de Traduction et Interprétation* (CIUTI).

Following the recent reform of the Italian university system, both Forlì and Trieste are in the process of changing their degree courses in Conference Interpreting or Translation from four to five years. The new syllabus comprises an initial 3-year qualification in Linguistic Mediation, followed by a 2-year specialisation in Conference Interpreting or Translation – i.e. the “Y” format (Mackintosh 1999: 71). The 2-year specialisation requires that interpreting students study three languages (A, B and C), Italian being the compulsory A language.

The degree thesis (known as a *tesi di laurea* or, more simply, *tesi*) is a standard requirement at Italian universities, which usually takes the best part of a year to prepare and must be defended before an examining commission. It generally accounts for about 10% of the overall final mark (slightly less at Forlì). Whatever the student's examination record, assessment of the thesis is thus an important part of the final grade – whether to ensure top honours or to improve the overall result. This helps explain why students rarely lack motivation and commitment when approaching this last hurdle before graduation.

The first thesis on interpreting at Forlì was defended in 1996. At the time of writing (summer 2001), a total of 36 have been completed, and several more are at an advanced stage of preparation. Details are regularly submitted to *The IRN Bulletin* (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/daniel.gile/>), and can also be found in issue number 10 of *The Interpreters' Newsletter* (2000). Output is steady, generally not fluctuating much from an average of about seven theses per year. Studies of interpreting are thus a relatively small part of the School's overall production,

for two main reasons: (i) many students specialise in translation, not interpreting; (ii) students often opt for research projects within related or complementary disciplines (ranging from terminology and linguistics to literature, cinema and history).

## 2. Thematic breakdown and examples

In terms of thematic breakdown, theses on interpreting so far completed at Forlì cover the following subjects:

topic:	number of studies:
experimental studies of interpreting	18 (14 simultaneous, 3 consecutive, 1 comparison simult. vs consec.)
observational studies	2
media interpreting	1
court interpreting	2
dialogue/community interpreting	3
perception of quality	2
surveys on topics other than quality	1
description and reflection	5
literature review	1
history of interpreting	1
total	36

Table 1: topics of graduation theses on interpreting at Forlì (up to July 2001)

While there is no single dominant theme, empirical theses account for more than half the total (20/36), as compared to just over a third in Gile's (2000) statistics for production of theses by the five leading countries during the 90s (see section 1.1).

Of the 20 empirical studies in Table 1, almost all report experimental research (18 theses), generally on simultaneous interpreting (14 theses). Observational research is the subject of only two theses – actually three, since the category “dialogue/community interpreting” includes an interesting observational study by Elena Fogazzaro (1998). However, quantitative trends do not necessarily reflect an institutional bias towards experimentation as opposed to observation. The probable explanation is simply that “field” recordings of professional interpreting are not readily available (except in the context of media interpreting). On the other hand, experimental studies can readily be set up with students, graduates and interpreting lecturers as subjects. Recently, some

authorised recordings of professional interpreting at congresses have been made available for research at the School, and a number of students are currently working on these. One such study, nearing completion at the time of writing, examines speed of the source and target speeches in simultaneous interpreting. Gile (1998: 72) argues that observational research of this kind can afford a valuable descriptive base for the study of interpreting.

Experimental theses have to date focused on a variety of topics. One of the subjects examined is the *comparison between students and professional interpreters*. Germana Tassora (1999) compares consecutive interpretations from French to Italian, by six students and six professional interpreters, with specific reference to handling of phatic speech items and fidelity to the source speech. Each subject interpreted two speeches. By comparison with students, professional interpreters: (i) reproduced more effectively the speaker's initial greetings and strategies to establish contact with the audience; (ii) conveyed more information; (iii) reproduced expressions from the source speech less literally. Elena Esposito (1999) compares simultaneous interpretations, again from French to Italian, by six students or recent graduates and six experienced professional interpreters. The specific focus of the study, in which each subject interpreted two speeches, is a quantitative analysis of filled pauses as an index of fluency. Esposito notes that the professional subjects, while making fewer filled pauses than students, tend to pause before major reformulations. Both groups pause before certain items, like numbers, dates and names.

Other experiments have been based on *theories and concepts in the literature*. For example, two major sources of difficulty in comprehension identified by Gile in the *Effort models* (e.g. Gile 1995: 106-108) are: (i) speech characteristics requiring increased processing capacity (e.g. bad pronunciation by a non-native speaker); (ii) problems associated with "vulnerability" of certain speech segments to momentary processing capacity shortage (e.g. numbers). These points are addressed in studies by Elisabetta Sabatini (1999) and Cristina Mazza (2000). Sabatini examines simultaneous interpretation of "non standard" speech, while Mazza focuses on numbers in simultaneous interpretation. Both studies analyse interpretations from English into Italian, by final year students at Forlì.

Sabatini's sample comprises 10 subjects. Using two English speeches with many examples of "non standard" usage (one by an Indian and one by an American), subjects were tested in listening comprehension, shadowing and simultaneous interpretation. Different speech sections were used for each exercise, scores being compared to ascertain whether they reflect: (i) consistent comprehension problems; (ii) differing degrees of complexity in the three tasks (i.e., listening comprehension easier than shadowing, and shadowing easier than simultaneous interpretation). While general comprehension of the two speakers

was not problematic, simultaneous interpretations contained many errors and omissions triggered by “non standard” lexical, phonetic and other features. This finding is consistent with the theoretical background provided by the Effort models. In terms of the relative difficulty of the three tasks, a frequent tendency to “correct” the source speech during shadowing introduced an unexpected confound and scores for shadowing were on the whole not better than those for interpreting – sometimes they were actually lower.

Mazza evaluates the “signal vulnerability” associated with numbers, examining the hypothesis that, if the interpreter does not write them down immediately, the need to store them in the short term memory can create problems in overall coordination of listening/analysis, memory and production. The study (reported elsewhere in this volume) compares simultaneous interpretation of two speeches containing large quantities of numbers, the independent variable being that subjects are allowed to use a pen and paper in only one of the two speeches. The error rate with numbers indeed proves high, especially when subjects cannot take notes – though notes are not particularly helpful for complex large numbers.

Other empirical theses by Forlì students have investigated concepts put forward, but not systematically tested, by Seleskovitch. An example is a study focusing on the concept of *deverbalisation*, by Barbara Rizzoli (2000). The study is based on the idea that, if *deverbalisation* occurs, the interpreter should achieve limited verbatim recall of the source speech. This idea has already been examined by Isham (1994) and Gran and Bellini (1996), investigating simultaneous interpretation from English into French and Italian respectively. Rizzoli’s study tests 32 Italian native speakers for verbatim recall of two recorded speeches – one in Italian and one in English. Sixteen subjects listened to the speeches; the other 16, all final year interpreting students with English as their B language, interpreted them simultaneously (from English to Italian and vice versa). In both groups, the cassette was stopped at certain points and subjects were asked to write down the words they had just heard. The analysis was based on the last three clauses heard, to compare verbatim recall across clause and sentence boundaries. A possible explanation for the finding that interpreters on the whole returned lower scores than listeners is that simultaneous interpreting involves *deverbalisation*. However, the variability in results suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Verbatim recall by interpreters was actually better in English (i.e., when they were interpreting *from* their B language) than in Italian (interpreting *into* B). Probably the most interesting and original part of Rizzoli’s work is the final discussion, in which she argues that some instances of incorrect recall (e.g., “election system”, sometimes recalled as “electoral system”) were caused by problems of retrieval from memory. This consideration raises doubts as to whether errors in verbatim

recall necessarily indicate that the words concerned have disappeared without trace from the subject's memory (i.e. been "deverbalised"). Rizzoli's final appraisal of her data thus introduces a critical perspective on the idea, central to the study, that the extent of verbatim recall can be taken as an index of deverbalisation.

Rizzoli's thesis is an example of how it is possible to use the methodology of other authors (in this case Isham, and Gran and Bellini) without actually replicating their studies. While replication consolidates available data and can provide valuable learning experience for researchers, they often find it relatively unattractive because it involves no innovation (Gile 1995: 227-228).

Michela Minelli (2001) addresses *language specificity in interpreting*, an issue which attracts more attention nowadays than in the 70s and 80s. Minelli analyses 32 simultaneous interpretations into Italian – 16 from an original English speech, and 16 from a French version of the same speech. All subjects were final year interpreting students at Forlì, having English or French as their B language. The analysis focuses on how subjects conveyed the original speaker's exhortations and promises. Generally, subjects interpreting from French remained closer to the *form* of the source speech than those working from English. This probably reflects the greater formal similarity between two Romance languages than between a Romance and a Germanic language. It does not necessarily give any indication as to how faithfully the *sense* of the source speech is conveyed. The study highlights that language combination is not the only variable affecting the degree to which subjects reproduce the form of the source speech. The extent to which they did so, in both languages, was associated with two factors: (i) length of speech segments, the tendency being to maintain the form of short segments, but not of longer ones; (ii) the tendency to translate more literally in the second part of the speech than the first. A possible explanation for this is that subjects lapsed into what they found less demanding when they started to tire. Though each speech lasted little more than 10 minutes (and was thus relatively short by professional standards), this is more or less the standard length of speeches in simultaneous interpreting examinations at Forlì, suggesting that subjects might have felt tired by the final part of the speech.

Cerebral lateralisation, a prominent topic of research at Trieste, has to date been the subject of only one thesis at Forlì (Baldi 2001). This is not surprising, given the need for an interdisciplinary approach involving expertise in neurolinguistics. Interestingly, Lucia Baldi's study considers *manual preference* as an independent variable for qualitative evaluation of simultaneous interpretation from English (B) to Italian (A), by 25 final year students of interpretation: 10 right-handers, 10 left-handers, and also five ambidextrous subjects who were not included in the statistical comparison of error counts as a function of manual preference. Comparing subjects according to manual

preference is actually not common in research on cerebral lateralisation in interpreting. This is understandable, since studying only right-handed subjects (as in Gran and Fabbro 1988) ensures that manual preference is not a confound in comparison of cerebral lateralisation at different stages in interpreter training. Baldi's study examines two simultaneous interpretations performed monaurally – one with the subject's "preferred" ear for simultaneous interpretation, the other with the "non preferred" ear. The main objective was to compare errors of content according to two variables: (i) subjects' manual preference (right- or left-handed); (ii) which ear they listened with. On the whole, left-handers made significantly less mistakes than right-handers, and subjects preferring the left ear made less mistakes than those preferring the right ear. At the same time, subjects generally made more mistakes with the preferred ear than the non-preferred ear. This suggests that any actual advantage gained by preference for one ear can in some way be compensated for when using the other – perhaps by increased attention. Baldi's results provide an interesting complement to Sylvie Lambert's (1989) finding that eighteen right-handed simultaneous interpreters, working in both directions between English and French, performed better when listening with the left ear. Lambert considers two possible explanations: (a) the tendency to prefer the right ear for self-monitoring; (b) the effectiveness of the left ear in channelling the incoming acoustic signal to the right hemisphere, indicating that both hemispheres are involved in the interpreting process.

While the above examples are only a few of the theses completed at Forlì in the last five years, they illustrate the kind of theoretical background and practical work which can be involved. Consecutive interpreting has to date prompted fewer theses than simultaneous (3, as opposed to 14), possibly reflecting a preference for simultaneous interpreting among students. Palazzi's (1999: 43) comments on the psychological tension that students tend to associate with consecutive suggest that they often see it as a necessary evil – a phenomenon which Ilg (1988) observes even among professional interpreters. However, it seems unlikely that the preference for research on simultaneous interpreting at Forlì stems from consistent aversion to consecutive. A number of studies currently in progress are either specifically about consecutive or compare the two modes.

Dialogue/community interpreting and court interpreting have been the subject of few theses. There are two probable explanations for this: (i) as in the case of observational research on conference interpreting (see comment on Table 1, above), "field" recordings are not readily accessible, particularly if they contain personal or confidential information; (ii) experimental studies involving fellow students are arguably less practicable and appropriate for these forms of interpreting than for conference interpreting. However, given the increasing interest in dialogue/community interpreting and court interpreting as subjects of

academic study, they are likely to become more prominent as research topics for theses over the next few years.

### 3. Taking stock and looking ahead

While no sweeping generalisation can be made about the qualities and weaknesses of *tesi di laurea*, one aspect which has continued to improve over the years is the breadth and organisation of prior reading. There are a number of reasons for this. First, library facilities have developed considerably, giving students readier access to the literature than a few years ago. This applies not only to text books and standard works of reference, but also to journals covering translation and interpreting topics. Second, Internet has perhaps also contributed in this respect, with increasing on-line availability of bibliographic references and “virtual” publications (for example, *META*). Third, a number of good theses have set a precedent, presenting well argued examinations of relevant sources rather than an unstructured survey of the “classics”. Finally (but perhaps not least), several seminars and courses in theory have been run in recent years. One point which could perhaps be stressed more in such seminars is the wealth of information and data to be tapped in other theses. It is not suggested that summarising and commenting on data reported in earlier theses should *replace* a comprehensive review of standard text books and studies. However, theses can prove an excellent source of empirical data on a specific subject and, as such, are an important complement to the theoretical basis provided by books.

In terms of weaknesses, these tend not to differ much from the faults which often mar more advanced research – for example, failure to focus on a workable topic, to base empirical work on a well reasoned initial argument, or to present results clearly (and to best effect). In this respect, Mead’s analysis of problems in doctoral research (Mead 2001) offers practical information relevant to work on graduation theses. Perhaps the main problem is difficulty in establishing (and maintaining!) a realistic time schedule. Sometimes, procrastination and/or poor planning in the early stages entails a rush to meet the final deadline. In other cases, understandable impatience to graduate (and possibly avoid paying further enrolment fees) curtails work on a lengthy but far from perfect manuscript.

Some of the best theses lead to publications. Francesca Gaiba’s 1996 thesis about simultaneous interpreting at the first Nuremberg Trial provided the basis for her book on the subject (Gaiba 1998; review by Baigorri-Jalón 2000). However, there is no guarantee that a good thesis will be published, even as a short article. There are two frequent obstacles in this respect. First, once graduation is over, the author may not find the time or motivation to work at revising, adapting and/or summarising a thesis for publication. One way of ensuring that a potential publication is not wasted in this way is to share the



work – and the authorship – with the supervisor and/or co-supervisor. A second limiting factor for publication in international journals is that many theses defended at Forlì are written in Italian. Indeed, out of 36 theses, 28 have been written in Italian and only 8 in another language (English). Since texts in Italian are not accessible to an international readership, it may prove advisable to rewrite them in a language like English or French. Simply editing and summarising the thesis may thus not be enough to ensure publication in a widely read journal. Pöchhacker's (1995: 23) survey of the 1989-1994 period indicates that authors of theses in other countries face the same problem, with 5 theses out of 60 in English, 25 in German, 3 in Spanish, and the remaining 27 in languages less accessible to an international readership (Italian, Czech/Slovak, Finnish, Swedish). If it proves possible one day for centres with a regular output of theses to post at least an abstract in two or three languages on Internet, this could allow valuable exchanges of information between different research groups.

In Italy, it is still too early to know what effect, if any, the university reform will have on the quantity and quality of theses about interpreting. Prospects will become clearer only from about 2005 on, when the new "3+2" system hits its stride. However, the indications are that Forlì is well placed to ensure a steady output of theses in the foreseeable future. One positive sign in this respect is the number of academic staff involved in supervision of research. While a nucleus of less than ten individuals have been regularly involved in supervising the theses so far completed, the number of colleagues contributing continues to increase. Some teachers of interpreting are committed essentially to the practical business of training interpreters, and take little or no part in supervision of research. Those who do may thus work in tandem with language or linguistics specialists, and a variety of disciplines are represented on the commissions which assess theses. This means that interpreters have no monopoly on the supervision and assessment of research work on interpreting. Though consensus is not always easily reached, this system makes for cross-fertilisation – staff not directly involved in interpreter training can learn about empirical work on interpreting, while interpreters can learn to appraise their work by the standards of "mainstream" academic disciplines. Such exchanges are surely going to prove a vital factor if the momentum gained during the last five years is to be maintained and further developed.

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