

Memory Errors in Interpreting: How Semantics and Background Insufficiency Affect Interpretation

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Abstract: A weak memory can cause grave mistakes during an interpretation which may affect interpreters' self-esteem and leave strong psychological implications to them. This paper mainly focuses on discussing what problems memory would cause and the reason why they show during an interpreting, as well as methods to leave this predicament. This essay is divided into two main parts: analysis and understanding of literatures for reasons of memory issues with author's own opinions in the end, and a conclusion.

Keywords: Interpreting; Memory; Mistakes; Methods; Predicament

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1. Reasons of memory issues

1.1. Background insufficiency

What does background mean? 'Background information can be defined as material presented prior to a text that provides information related to but not contained within the text.'^[1] Background knowledge include the basic elements of the case, such as time, location, client's requirement and expectation, and the most crucial section: specialized vocabulary and general knowledge in the relative field.

Why interpreters may not remember very well if they don't have enough background information? Here is a reason that comes from a scientific experiment: "Background stimuli is closely related to simple learning situations, such as habituation and classical conditioning^[2]." To understand this sentence, we have to know the relationship between memory and habituation firstly. "One possible interpretation is that working memory capacity (WMC) influences how efficiently stimulus-no-consequence mappings are stored in memory. Another possibility, based on the observation that high-WMC individuals who have superior inhibition capabilities^[3]. It is that WMC influences how efficiently people map the deviant sound to an inhibition response. A third possibility, based on the notion that deviants lose their captivating power when they are expected to do so^[3]. That is, WMC influences the participants ability to predict when deviants are presented^[3]." It demonstrates that by acquiring background knowledge, we may organize our thoughts more logically, and predict a client's expectant speech more likely. So, it would be easier for us to remember some topics by shaping a logical chain about those topics we have heard in our minds than remember fragmentary details. For example, when interpreters need to think between two different thinking models that relate to countries, the more interpreters acquaint with their client's expressing patterns, the exacter can they translate.

In addition, background information is crucial. For example, in LeFevre, Smith-Chant, Hiscock, Daley,

& Morris's survey in 2003, "the participants completed the Math background and interest's questionnaire, which includes a series of questions about their educational background and experiences and their attitudes and beliefs about mathematics ^[4]." The same condition also happened in Bryan C. Auday, Elizabeth Kelminson, and Henry A. Cross's experiment ^[5]. These two journals prove that gaining background data is indispensable to help managing clear thoughts to ease the memory difficulties of people.

Nevertheless, no matter how useful background data is, interpreters should use the backgrounds they acquired reasonably and carefully. Since not all the clients would state as interpreters expected, interpreters who rely on background materials too much may be misled by their own foreseeability.

1.2. False memory caused by semantics

"Semantics is a sub discipline of linguistics which focuses on the study of meaning. Semantics tries to understand what meaning is as an element of language and how it is constructed by language as well as interpreted, obscured and negotiated by speakers and listeners of language ^[6]." The study of semantics includes the study of how meaning is constructed, interpreted, clarified, obscured, illustrated, simplified negotiated, contradicted and paraphrased ^[7]. Since semantics has extensive relationships with meanings, it plays essential role to analysis interpreters' comprehensions of meanings of clauses.

1.2.1. Vague language production

"Production" in linguistics means expression. Expressions from some clients are unpredictable, which can also mislead interpreter. This is because statements without strong logic usually contain some semantics that violate people's common sense. When this happens, it would be difficult for the interpreter who misunderstand his client's thoughts to remember the details clearly. Then a gap of what the client expects to deliver and what the interpreter understands shows. "The mind boggles because a causal connection is asserted to hold between two apparently unrelated events; the subject cannot call to mind an appropriate schema (known scenario) into which the events can be substituted and thus related causally. For example, causal sentences such as: "The notes were sour because the seams split;" "The voyage wasn't delayed because the bottle shattered;" "The haystack was important because the cloth ripped ^[8]." These three examples given by Bransford and Johnson (1972), Bransford and McCarrell (in press), and Doll and Lapinski (1974), which is appropriate to illustrate this view.

To solve this problem, interpreters need to pay more attention on lexical relations. Lexical relations analysis derives from observing that there are certain expectancy relations between words. For example, "if people read the word *mouse* in a text, they will not be surprised to come across the words *cheese*, *white*, *squeak*, *tail*, or *rodent* in nearby text, while people would be much more surprised to come across the word's *thunderstorm*, *bark*, or *ironing board* ^[9]." So, interpreters can take advantage of "following a link model of the type presented by Collins and Loftus (1975), a word pair may be represented in semantic memory as two nodes connected by a specific link that conveys the special meaning of the word pair. When one of the words included in a word pair is processed, activation spreading in all links also will prime the second word in the word pair ^[10]." This inner connection between things and their lexical meanings would help arising interpreters' foreseeability and opening their minds when hearing some phases difficult to comprehend.

Different meanings in one sentence can also affects an interpreter's memory by misleading his judgment. For instance, Dr Mira Kim has once said on her lesson "Would you hit a woman with a baby?" This phrase can be understood as "Would you use a baby to hit a woman?" and "Would you hit a woman who is holding a baby?" This is an example for comic translation, but this circumstance usually happens on clients with limit knowledge. To handle the surprises, interpreters should mediate what the clients have said or are going to say resourcefully.

As what Hill, A.L said in 2004: “One primary goal for forming a profession is to limit practice to those who are aware of the mislead of prior practitioners and who are dedicated to using strategies that allow them to avoid those pitfalls in the future ^[11].” To avoid pitfalls in the future, practicing is the most active and positive way to defuse the embarrassment that caused by weak memory is to improve memory. And the best way to enhance memory is training. Scientists found evidence “that the accuracy for temporal memory was improved for the subjects receiving extended practice ^[5],” since practice is effective, what kind of practice is resultful for interpreters to do? “The present data show that cytologists and radiologists were somewhat better than control observers at recognizing previously viewed stimuli from their domain of expertise ^[12].” This data illustrates that to creating or forming a picture in minds and help interpreters building stronger memories.

1.2.2. Word length

Perplexity caused by sentence length can happen in every professional field, especially in some subjects that require pinpoint accuracy and extremely preciseness, such as law, medicine, psychology, and technology and so on. For instance, “the “superior interest defense,” provides that a third-party claimant may defeat the government's effort to forfeit the property if the third party has a legal right, title, or interest in the property, and such right, title, or interest renders the order of forfeiture invalid in whole or in part because the right, title, or interest was vested in the (third party) rather than the defendant or was superior to any right, title, or interest of the defendant at the time of the (crime) ^[13],” is a highly long words in law. Although long sentences like the example above is not that common in English, interpreters also have to put it on the agenda and try to recognize the reason more. That is working memory is the most dominant, remain primarily verbal theories that do not make precise predictions and that apply only to situations lasting a few seconds, so-called short-term memory. “Not only can the feature model produce appropriate results for much of the word-length literature, it can also simulate many other effects, including primacy and recency effects, suffix effects, modality effects, effects of articulatory suppression and phonological similarity, and temporal grouping effects ^[14].”

Nevertheless, as far as the author is concerned the circumstance that has been mentioned above is not only happens in an interpreter’s second language. Take Chinese as an example, there are more long and complicated sentences in Chinese legal instruments than in English legal instruments according to my own observation. Because people in Chinese pay more attention to the dignity of law, while people who speak English cares more about the strictness of law. And intricacy makes things mysterious, and mysteries makes things holy and inviolable. However, opinions to law in English countries is different. Simplesness makes things clear, and clarity makes things less error prone. Even it would be much easier for them to understand their mother tongue, interpreters may also find it is difficult to interpret all the content because they must divert their own attention. Consequently, although interpreters have remembered the whole content, they may lose some points when they need to transfer their thoughts into another language.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, interpreting can be affected by a variety of objective and subjective factors: whether interpreters’ background knowledge in both special areas, whether cases are clear enough. Whether interpreters master the solutions to analysis sentences that have confusing semantics. Interpreting, on the other hand, is a high strength work that needs strong memory, wide knowledge and good psychological quality. These three parts are closely associated with each other during interpreting, and all the troubles they bring to interpreters would lead to memory issues. Under this condition, notes taking can remind an interpreter about the structure of the content heard. However, a clear note is based on a logic memory chain

since notes are reflections of people's thoughts. If the wrong concepts have been formed in an interpreter's mind, no matter how excellent his notes are, he cannot express his client's views. Therefore, knowing how to handle all these memory issues is as significant as analyzing the reason why they could happen.

Disclosure statement

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