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Chinese-English Retour: Analysing the Impact of Language Errors

Irene AiLing Zhang and Matthew Bailey*

Shanghai International Studies University
550 Dalian West Road, Shanghai, 200083, P.R. China

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The chronic shortage of native English speakers who are competent in Chinese has made it imperative that native Chinese speakers who have been professionally trained to be interpreters work bi-directionally between Chinese and English. This presents a unique challenge to interpreters in China compared to interpreters working with European languages, who are required only to work into their mother tongue. This paper aims to address the issues that Chinese A interpreters face when working into English and examine the impact of linguistic errors on native English listeners by comparing the English output by English A interpreters with English B interpreters. The authors hope to help English B interpreters improve on such issues, and help the native English listeners who have to rely on interpreting to understand if/when they do come across such issues.

Keywords: Chinese-English simultaneous interpreting, grammar, syntax, lexical errors.

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Research area: philology.

1. Introduction

In recent years interpreters whose working languages are Chinese and English must interpret to and from both languages, unlike with most other languages the interpreter only interprets into their mother tongue. As with a few other “less commonly used” languages such as Arabic, this situation has arisen not due to convenience or an ample supply of native Chinese interpreters with bilingual English skills, but rather because there is currently only a very limited number of native English interpreters with Chinese as a working language.

A quick search on the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) website reveals that out of a total of 25 members in China working from Chinese into English, only two are native English speakers. This means that the overwhelming majority of Chinese/English interpreters today must work into their B language, English, posing challenges for both the listener and the interpreter. The listener must learn to adjust to a non-native English voice and the interpreter has the added task of having to focus on language accuracy while still ensuring a smooth and complete delivery.

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* Corresponding author E-mail address: azhang@shisu.edu.cn

The demands placed on Chinese interpreters today are made clear by Setton (1994), who comes to the conclusion that as most multilingual conferences with Chinese and Japanese require relay interpreting, this places high demands on the the quality of the interpreter's acquired language (English), particularly with regard to clarity, compression and cohesion (pp. 185-186). During the course of this research it is therefore important to consider not only the impact of the interpreter's English output on the conference target audience, but also how this may affect interpreters working with relay.

According to Seleskovitch, founder of the Paris school of interpreting, the interpreter should render the source language message with a total feel for the target language, so that the expressions s/he uses sound immediately familiar to the listener, without the listener being forced to "reinterpret" or constantly reformulate the message in a way he would talk about the topic at hand (Seleskovitch, 1989). This inevitably increases the burden for interpreters working into their B language, who have to render the message with a much smaller language repertoire than native speakers.

Grammatical and syntactic errors by non-native English interpreters can have a major impact on the listener. This can range from a slight "annoyance" on the ear of the listener (for example due to the continuous misuse of the singular/plural) to seriously impeding the message of the speaker (misuse of tense or conditional tense). The idea behind this research is to investigate how grammatical and syntactic errors during Chinese – English translation affect the native English listener, focusing on issues such as improper use of definite/indefinite article, misuse of singular/plural, noun chains, incorrect tense and inappropriate choice of vocabulary.

The analysis of the transcripts will be used to provide recommendations for Chinese interpreters working into English and suggest how the quality of English output can be improved. This research constitutes a valuable addition to retour practice, in the current context, the Chinese/English interpreting profession. Due to the lack of native English interpreters with Chinese as a working language, there has previously been a lack of research that focuses on the impact of non-native English on the native English listener. This paper aims to address this shortfall and make interpreters aware of the common errors that impact on the quality of a Chinese – English delivery.

2. Research

In order to assess these factors, two native Chinese interpreters and two native English interpreters will interpret a Chinese speech by Dr. Justin Yifu Lin, a Chinese economist. The transcripts of the interpretations are analyzed for the errors mentioned above and comment will be given as to how these errors may have an impact on a native English listener. Comparisons will be made between the two non-native interpretations in order to establish whether there is any consistency in the errors made. A comparison will also be drawn between the impact of linguistic errors on delivery by both English B and native English interpreters.

2.1 *Reasons for choice of material*

The Chinese speech that will be interpreted into English is a speech by the Chinese economist Lin Yifu at China International Urbanization Forum. The speed of the speech is around 540 Chinese characters/minute, or 540 English syllables, suitable for simultaneous interpreting. The speech is not read off a script and has some elements of spontaneity, therefore making this piece an ideal choice for analysis.

The areas covered are not too specific and the subject matter (the Chinese economy and urbanisation) should be sufficiently familiar to the interpreters so as not to cause major issues with the flow and completeness of the interpretation. This will ensure that focus is on the quality of the English output without being significantly affected by other factors. At the same time, the speech also contains some more challenging aspects, such as more complex ideas and numbers, which will put the interpreter under a certain amount of pressure (as should be expected in a professional environment) which is likely to affect the quality of the interpreter's language output for whom English is the B language.

2.2 Problems envisaged

The table below shows some examples of common errors made by English B interpreters. It is envisaged that the errors in the table will reflect the errors encountered during the analysis of the interpretation transcripts.

Type of error	Example	Corrected version	Impact on listener
Improper use of articles	In current world, we can only achieve the goals by working together.	In <i>the</i> current world, we can only achieve the goals by working together.	Listener is unsure which "goals" are being invoked; adds uncertainty to the message.
Misuse of singular/plural	Both parties will work to strengthen communications between the two cities.	Both parties will work to strengthen communication between the two cities.	Has a cumulative effect on the listener, distracting their attention away from the message.
Noun chains	There have been many urbanization dialogue achievements.	There have been many achievements made through dialogue on urbanization	Information is too dense; the listener needs to "unpack" the nouns in order to understand the message. This of particular concern to interpreters relying on English relay.
Incorrect tense	China's growth rate was always high.	China's growth rate has always been high.	Confuses listener as to the time of events; in this example, the listener would be led to believe that China no longer has a high growth rate.

3. Analysis of Transcripts

3.1 Method of obtaining recordings

There are four transcripts of the simultaneous interpretation of the material. Transcripts A and B are interpretations by native English speakers, while scripts C and D are interpretations by native Chinese speakers. In order to ensure a fair test, the interpretations took place at the same time and venue, and the interpreters were not informed of the speech material in advance. Interpreters C and D have both been active on the interpreting market for approximately one year.

3.2 Grammatical and syntactic errors and how this may impact on the listener

3.2.1 Improper use of articles

The misuse of the definite and indefinite article is a problem that affects many native Chinese interpreters when working into English. For the native English listener, repeated misuse of articles can have a cumulative effect on the overall impression of the interpretation, which can prove

to be irritating if sustained over an entire speech. This is illustrated by the example below.

Examples

Example 1 – Omission of article in set phrases

一方面给我们的国有企业必要的保护补贴

Interpreter C: “*On one hand, we give enterprises necessary subsidies.*”

The omission of the definite article from “On the one hand” is then repeated a second time later in the speech:

一方面当然是减少了城市自己的负担

Interpreter C: “*On one hand, it reduces the burden of the city itself...*”

The above error would not affect the comprehension of a native English listener, but as this is a set phrase which must always include the definite article, errors of this kind are likely to undermine the overall impression produced by the interpretation, adding to the “cumulative effect” on the listener mentioned above. This could easily be corrected through the interpreter’s analysis of their own performance in order to ensure that set phrases are learnt correctly (as proven in the case of interpreter D, who does not make such errors).

Example 2 – Misuse of definite article

Examples of this kind can be found in both interpretations C and D.

我相信中国还有潜力维持高速增长。

Interpreter C: “*I believe China still has the potential to sustain the high growth rate.*”

这是“休克疗法”，它的用意是好的，但是问题是什么

Interpreter D: “*This is huge reform, but it also has the weaknesses.*”

These are examples of using the definite article where it should not be used. In circumstances such as these, the speaker’s message may be misheard, as the addition of the definite article where the noun has not been defined can leave the listener unsure as to what the speaker is referring to. For interpreters relying on English relay, this can constitute a problem as many European languages also feature definite and indefinite articles. Hearing the incorrect article in English may result in the interpreter making the same mistake in their output when working under pressure.

Conclusion

The errors involving the misuse of articles were significantly fewer than the author’s expectations. Both interpreter C and interpreter D made a minimum of at least eight such errors (“minimum” here referring to the number of indisputable errors; the exact number can vary as some other errors could be disputed). Considering the total length of the speech is approximately 13 minutes, both interpreters used the article correctly in the majority of cases. However, the presence of these errors in both interpretations illustrates that interpreters working into their B language must be constantly aware of the use of articles and the cumulative effect that this can have on the listener and the subtle nuances in meaning arising from the addition/removal of an article.

3.2.2 Misuse of singular/plural

Similar to the misuse of the definite/indefinite article, the choice of singular or plural forms

of nouns also poses a significant difficulty for Chinese interpreters. As expected, interpretations C and D contain quite a few examples of such errors. Even when the interpreter provides the correct version of the noun, this is often followed by the wrong form of the verb – not distinguishing between the plural and third person form of the present tense. Taken in isolation, this may appear insignificant to Chinese speakers, yet to a native English ear they represent the most basic of grammatical errors. When such errors are repeated frequently throughout a speech, they can become irritating to a native English listener, which makes the interpreter more conspicuous and can detract attention away from the speaker's message.

Examples

Example 3

但是发展中国家跟发达国家比较起来有一点差异

Interpreter C: *"Why is that? Because developing countries is different from developed countries."*

Interpreter D: *"This is the unique difference between developing country and developed country, the former of which..."*

It is interesting to note that both interpreters make a similar error in the same sentence. Interpreter D uses the singular form country rather than the plural; interpreter C chooses the correct form of the noun but this is then followed by the singular form of the verb. These two errors can be compared to the output of the two native English speakers:

Interpreter A: *"...there's a difference here between China as a developing country and the developed countries."*

Interpreter B: *"Well that's because developing countries are different to developed countries."*

Let us now pause to consider the impact of the above four versions on the native English listener. The errors in the versions provided by interpreters C and D would fail to go unnoticed by the listener, and in comparison to the native versions, the listener would be distracted to a certain degree, reminding them of the interpreter's presence. This point is illustrated by Hönig, who argues that the interpreter's output should be linguistically "inconspicuous" (1995: 27). Errors such as the above have the opposite effect.

Example 4

放开对原来符合优势的产业的进入, 包括乡镇企业、民营企业、三资企业。

Interpreter C: *"...in some critical industries, private company, private companies needs to be allowed to enter"*

In this instance, the interpreter has realised that the singular form of "company" is incorrect and attempts to rectify the error by repeating the plural form. However, this is then followed by the incorrect form of the verb. Errors such as these impede the flow of information, wasting valuable time and resulting in the loss of subsequent information. This is illustrated perfectly in this example, where interpreter C fails to interpret the subsequent message relating to the loss in rent seeking/graft and a drop in income disparity. This simple grammatical error and unsuccessful attempt to correct the error has had a very noticeable impact on the completeness of the speaker's message.

Conclusion

A lack of sensitivity in the use of singular and plural forms of nouns makes the interpreter more “conspicuous” to the listener and can deflect attention away from the message. When working into a foreign language, interpreters do not have the support of instinct, which automatically guides the expression of thoughts. This instinct also has a “corrective” effect, which enables the interpreter to discover imperfections immediately and correct them without having to undergo the process of grammatical analysis. (Dejean LeFéal, 2000:11). It is this process of grammatical analysis that impedes the interpreter when working into their B language, often resulting in a subsequent loss of information.

3.2.3 Noun Chains

The presence of an unbroken string of nouns is another trait that is common to Chinese interpreters working into English. In English it is often necessary to “unpack” a series of nouns (using prepositions, for example) from the Chinese in order to result in a sentence that can be immediately understood by the listener. Failing to do so can result in information that is overly dense and can confuse the listener as to the relationship between different nouns. For interpreters relying on an English relay, this could easily impede the comprehension of the message and result in the loss of information.

Example 5

从新结构经济学的角度来看...

Interpreter C: “*From new structure economics perspective...*”

Interpreter D: “*Seen from the new structure economic point...*”

In this example, both versions feature three consecutive nouns preceded by an adjective. This phenomenon has been coined as a “noun chain” by Richard Wydick (1998). Combinations of two nouns, such as *football game* do not present a problem to the listener. However, combinations of three or more nouns may “strangle” the listener and require them to “unpack” the information before being able to understand it. Continuing on the example of *football game*, this is illustrated below:

- i. *football game ticket*
- ii. *football game ticket price*
- iii. *football game ticket price increase*
- iv. *football game ticket price increase proposal*

The more nouns that appear unbroken in succession, the longer it takes for the listener to determine the relationship between the nouns. This would clearly have a detrimental impact on the performance of interpreters relying on English relay from the Chinese booth. Versions C and D can be compared with the versions provided by interpreters A and B.

Interpreter A: “*From the point of view of structural economics*”

Interpreter B: “*In terms of new structural economics*”

Interpreters A and B have broken up the chain of nouns by placing “perspective” (角度) at the beginning of the sentence and using the preposition “of”. This is accommodating to the native English listener and conducive to immediate comprehension. Interpreters C and D both provide a version that features three consecutive nouns, which is unnatural to the English ear and which places an added burden on the listener.

3.2.4 *Incorrect Tense*

Of all the grammatical difficulties faced by Chinese interpreters when working into English, tense is perhaps the most significant and discernible. In Chinese, tense is often implicit or made clear by the addition of adverbials or time phrases. In English, tense must be expressed explicitly by verb inflection. Non-native speakers of English, particularly those whose native language does not feature verb inflection, must go through an extra process of grammatical analysis before producing the correct version of the verb. In addition to distracting the listener and increasing the “conspicuousness” of the interpreter, this can easily confuse the listener as to the sequence of events within a speech.

Example 6

我们城镇人口的比重超过农村人口，达到了52%。那么这可以说是中国改革开放所带来的快速增长给我们城镇化提供了机会。

Interpreter C: “*The urbanisation rate was 52%, so as we can see, the economic development brought up by the reform and opening up policy gives tremendous boost to urbanisation in China.*”

Interpreter D: “*China will enter a period when it can further raise its urbanisation rate up from the 52% base.*”

Interpreter C’s sentence contains four verbs, two of which are in an incorrect tense. Upon hearing “The urbanisation rate was 52%”, the listener’s first reaction would be to wonder *when* such a rate was recorded. The listener is further confused by the interpreter’s choice of the simple present tense “gives tremendous boost” (rather than *has given*). The listener faces the extra burden of needing to process the information heard; for an interpreter relying on English relay,

this extra burden would affect comprehension of the message and as a result, their own output.

Interpreter D’s version makes for slightly easier comprehension yet still fails to make clear that 52% is the *current* rate of urbanisation. This could easily be achieved by the addition of a time marker such as “today”. The output of interpreters A and B immediately makes clear that 52% refers to the current rate:

Interpreter A: “*So now China’s urban population accounts for more than the rural population, at 52% of the population.*”

Interpreter B: “*...at present the ratio is 52%,...*”

Conditional Tense

As the conditional tense is usually expressed in Chinese by use of the marker 会, interpreters often choose to use the future tense in English. However, while the future tense is not necessarily grammatically incorrect, the use of the conditional “would” can significantly improve the comprehensibility of the speaker’s message.

Example 7

如果说政府不再需要补贴这些产业的话，政府也就有更多的资金和能力来解决拉平...

Interpreter C: “*Once the government stopped subsidising those major enterprises, they will have more money to level the playing field*”

Interpreter D: “*When the government stops subsidising these industries, it has the capital and the ability to shrink...*”

The conditional tense is needed here in order to accurately convey the speaker’s intention. The speaker is predicting what *would* happen *if* the government *stopped* providing subsidies.

However, it is interesting to note that interpreters A and B do not opt for the conditional tense here:

Interpreter A: *“If the government no longer needs to subsidise these industries then the government has more resources at hand...”*

Interpreter B: *“If we don’t subsidise these companies, these industries, then the government will free up funds to try”*

From this example it can be seen that even in the output of native English speakers,

the conditional tense is not necessarily used when needed. The use of the conditional is therefore a point that should be noted not only by Chinese interpreters, but also by native English speakers, who should be wary of automatically converting 会 into “will”.

Example 8

In this example, interpreter A opts for the conditional tense, whilst the remainder of the interpreters use the future tense:

如果把户籍都取消掉, 那么必然会导致, 农村低收入的、公共服务水平比城市里面低的人大量的涌进城市。

Conditional Tense:

Interpreter A: *“If the government were to cancel the household registration system, then we’d inevitably see...”*

Future tense

Interpreter B: *“if we cancel all of these subsidies and remove them, then those people who are receiving poor public services in rural areas will move...”*

Interpreter C: *“But if we can do all of those... then we’ll see a huge wave of, inflood of migrant populations.”*

Interpreter D: *“If you remove all the household registration restriction, then you will see the influx of people from rural areas..”*

Conclusion

Use of the incorrect tense is a problem that occurs frequently during the output of non-native English interpreters. The examples above are by no means exhaustive and there are numerous instances throughout the text when both interpreters C and D do not use the correct tense. This can result in misunderstanding and often requires the listener to “reprocess” the information in order to be clear of the sequence of events within a passage. The consequences of this for the interpreter relying on the English relay are clear.

As shown above, the use of the conditional tense is lacking not only from interpreters working into B, but also in native English interpreters working into A. This is an issue which all interpreters working from Chinese into English should pay more attention to in order to convey the speaker’s message in a more coherent and stylistic way. This requires awareness of the context rather than a simple transcoding from “会” to “will”.

3.2.5 Incorrect choice of vocabulary

Inappropriate choice of vocabulary in the B language is one major factor that affects the intelligibility of the interpreter’s output. The vocabulary repertoire and flexibility of a non-native speaker will never be comparable to that of a native speaker, as is the case with grammatical analysis mentioned above.

Example 9

所谓“华盛顿共识”、“休克疗法”。。。

Interpreter C: *“First, the Shock Therapy, the so called Washington Equation.”*

This is an example of the interpreter not knowing the correct translation of a proper noun. Notwithstanding that the audience may be able to determine that the speaker actually means “Washington Consensus”, the incorrect translation of proper nouns (especially common names such as this one) undermines the credibility of the interpreter. Many listeners would expect the interpreter to be familiar with such terms.

Example 10

这个问题表现在很多方面, 比如说首先环境污染的问题, 北京及很多主要的城市出现了雾霾的问题。

Interpreter C: *“...for example environment pollution and the foggy weather in Beijing would be an excellent example.”*

The interpreter does not know the word for “雾霾天气” and uses the word “foggy”. The word “fog” has very different connotations to the word “smog”, which is the word chosen by both native English interpreters. However, if an interpreter working into their B language is unsure of the correct translation for a particular word, paraphrasing is an excellent technique to get around this difficulty without impacting on the accuracy of the speaker’s message. This is demonstrated in the strategy adopted by interpreter D in their version of this sentence:

Interpreter D: *“We know that there’s a severe environmental problem in Beijing’s air quality.”*

Interpreter D uses the word “air quality” to overcome the problem of “雾霾天气”. If interpreters who are working into B are able to demonstrate this kind of flexibility, the amount of incorrect vocabulary chosen can be significantly decreased.

Example 11

In some instances the incorrect choice of vocabulary can result in a sentence that is unintelligible:

。。。三资企业, 这些产业可以通过后发优势发展的非常快。

Interpreter C: *“Financial institutions needs to step up their effort to serve...enterprises of different ownerships”*

The phrase “enterprises of different ownerships” is meaningless. Interpreters relying on the English relay would be left either to “second guess” the meaning or choose to omit the sentence. The listener would be deprived of important information and repeated errors such as these could lead to considerable client dissatisfaction.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the transcripts has focused on grammatical and linguistic errors, including the use of articles, singular and plural noun forms, chain nouns, tense and vocabulary. While the effects that these errors have on the listener can vary, there are clear similarities in the problems arising from each type of error.

Frequent grammatical errors can have a cumulative effect that distracts the listener, undermining the “inconspicuous” role of the interpreter. Although these errors may not necessarily affect the intelligibility of the output, they are likely to have a much larger

impact on the native English ear than other problems that affect interpreters working into their B language, for example accent. Grammatically correct English spoken with a moderate foreign accent is much more pleasing to the native English ear than grammatically incorrect English spoken with an accent similar to a native English speaker.

Besides, it is critical to assess the impact of these linguistic errors on interpreters who depend on the English relay from the Chinese booth. This factor will become increasingly important in the future as Chinese gains importance as an international language; the number of multilingual conferences involving Chinese will continue to grow. Due to the chronic lack of native English interpreters able to work with Chinese, market conditions demand that Chinese interpreters must work into their B language. This situation is unlikely to change in the near future. In this regard, errors such as the incorrect tense and vocabulary may likely impede the intelligibility of the message therefore would have the most detrimental effect.

When working into their B language, interpreters are unable to rely on “instinct” and must assign additional capacity to the formulation of grammatically correct sentences. In simultaneous mode this can result in further information loss should an interpreter attempt to rectify a grammatical mistake they have made (shown in example 2 in the singular/plural noun sections). For native English interpreters, grammatical features such as tense, singular/plural and articles are dealt with subconsciously, meaning there is no need to assign extra capacity to the grammar of the output.

3.2 Recommendations

Notwithstanding the problems above, the analysis above can provide valuable suggestions for Chinese interpreters working into English,

as well as highlighting areas that native English interpreters can focus on

With regard to the use of articles and singular/plural forms of nouns, interpreters must always be aware of set phrases where the article/noun form never changes. The thorough learning of such phrases would ensure that errors such as these are never made. In addition, interpreters must also remember that continuous misuse of the definite article is likely to have a distracting effect on the native English listener.

Errors in tense are often the most conspicuous to the native English listener and can severely affect the comprehensibility of the interpreter’s output. To a certain extent, the ability to use the correct tense consistently depends on the “instinct” mentioned above. For non-native speakers of English, this “instinct” must be trained. The most effective way of doing so would be for interpreters to regularly spend time with native English speakers. Interpreting is an unnatural form of communication (listening and speaking at the same time) and there is no opportunity for the listener to correct the speaker’s use of tenses. Regular communication with native English speakers is likely to increase the sensitivity of non-native speakers to tenses and their use.

It is interesting to note that even for native English speakers, the conditional tense “would” is not always used when necessary. This is an issue that all interpreters should be aware of when constructing “if” clauses in English; the interpreter must be aware of the context to determine whether to choose “will” or “would”.

Another way to reduce the possibility of grammatical errors would be to maintain simple semantic constructions. As a sentence becomes increasingly complex, non-native English speakers are more likely to make grammatical mistakes. Even when a mistake has been made, in most cases it would be advisable not to backtrack

and rectify the error, as it might affect the delivery of subsequent information.

Of course, it is important to note that grammatical inaccuracy is not the only problem that affects interpreters working into their B language. The ability of an interpreter to do retour, i.e. work into their B language, also depends on many other factors, such as pronunciation, intonation, register and the interpreter's agility to deal with information such as anecdotes or jokes. Nevertheless, grammatically incorrect English has been the most salient problem

affecting Chinese interpreters. The current paper intends to draw attention to the problems that are most conspicuous to a native English listener; the granting of greater emphasis to these issues throughout an interpreter's training and career is likely to reduce the incidence of such errors. This would be beneficial not only to the interpreter's own performance and that of other interpreters depending on relay, but also to facilitate most effective communication which is the ultimate purpose of the interpretation service.

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**Перевод с родного языка на иностранный
для языковой пары “китайский-английский”:
анализ воздействия языковых ошибок**

Ирэн Айлин Чжан, Мэттью Бэйли
Шанхайский университет иностранных языков
Китай, 200083, Шанхай, Далянь Си Лу, 550

Хроническая нехватка носителей английского языка, которые были бы одновременно компетентны в китайском языке, привела к ситуации, когда переводчики, для которых китайский язык является родным языком, вынуждены осуществлять перевод в двух направлениях между китайским и английским языками. Это создаёт дополнительную сложность для переводчиков в Китае по сравнению с переводчиками, работающими с европейскими языками, которые обычно переводят только на родной язык. Эта статья направлена на решение вопросов, которые возникают, когда переводчики, для которых китайский язык является языком «А», выполняют перевод на английский язык.

Ключевые слова: китайско-английский синхронный перевод, грамматика, синтаксис, лексические ошибки.

Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.
