

Extreme language control: activation and inhibition as bilingual control mechanisms in conference interpreting

How is it possible that a simultaneous interpreter is able to listen to one language and express the same meaning in another language at the same time? How does the interpreter control both languages so that they do not get mixed up? Does the written text of a speech help or disturb the interpreter? Is the interpreter better able to control two languages than a bilingual without any conference interpreting experience? These are some of the questions this project will attempt to answer.

The aim of the project is to gain a better understanding of bilingual language control mechanisms, such as activation and inhibition, in conference interpreting, a task performed in extreme conditions: under cognitive load and temporal constraints, by investigating the role of interpreter training and experience. We want to find out whether interpreting experience and training enhance the control of two languages in the bilingual mind.

We will first create a Polish-English and English-Polish interpreting corpus on the basis of recorded interpretations from the European Parliament. We will analyse such naturalistically occurring data to see to lexical activation and inhibition in action. We will then ask professional conference interpreters, interpreting trainees (at the beginning and at the end of their training) and bilinguals to participate in a series of experiments. They will assess the similarity of word meanings, name and describe pictures and translate words into Polish and English. Such tasks have been reported to efficiently measure various aspects of linguistic processing. We will measure the accuracy and duration of the participants' responses. Conference interpreters and interpreting trainees will also be asked to complete simultaneous interpreting and sight translation tasks (in the latter they will read aloud in English a text that has been written in Polish or the reverse). We will measure accuracy, delay in relation to the source text and eye movements while reading the translated text. A combination of corpus-based and experimental research methods will help us determine how interpreting practice shapes bilingual control.

The current project will thus contribute to Translation Studies by extending knowledge about language control mechanisms in interpreting and the modulation of these processes by training and experience. It will also offer a contribution to psycholinguistics and the study of bilingualism by shedding new light on lexical activation and inhibition performed under specific temporal and cognitive constraints.