

The role of simultaneous interpreting in mitigating ideologically-loaded political discourse

The importance of translation and interpreting in the modern, multilingual world is perhaps most evident in politics, where simultaneous interpreting allows for almost real-time debates between parties who do not speak the same language. Traditionally, interpreters have been perceived as “clear conduits” (e.g. Gile 2009) – neutral messengers who recode the speaker’s message into the recipient’s language without changing the meaning of the source text in any way. While this traditional model persists in the public perception of the profession and in employers’ expectations (e.g. Diriker 2011), broader research on human communication suggests that such a view is idealized (e.g. van Dijk 2018, 30) and one-to-one interpretation between languages might be impossible. Indeed, a growing strand of research has questioned the conduit model by exploring the issue of interpreter agency (e.g. Clifford 2004; Beaton-Thome 2013; Bartłomiejczyk 2016), arguing that interpreters might have a greater influence on the meaning of the final message than previously assumed – for example by mitigating Eurosceptic speeches in the European Parliament (Bartłomiejczyk 2016).

In political discourse, the role of the interpreter might be especially important in the context of radical political ideologies. The views of right-wing populist politicians, which stand in opposition to such values of liberal democracy as minority rights or the separation of powers, have been recently given an unprecedented platform in the mass media. As a result, these radical views are becoming increasingly normalized and accepted (Mudde 2019). If the mass media as an intermediary between the message sender and the message receiver have been shown to influence the social normalization of illiberal views, then other mediators, such as interpreters, should also be considered as possible factors in the mitigation of such views and their normalization.

This project aims to investigate if simultaneous interpretation of political speeches can change their ideological content, and if such changes will be noticed by the speeches’ recipients. To answer these questions, a discourse analytical study and two experiments will be conducted. In the first stage, authentic recordings of English-language speeches on topics characteristic of right-wing populism given at the European Parliament and their simultaneous interpretations into Polish will be analysed using methods of the discourse-historical approach. It is a methodology within Critical Discourse Studies which focuses on the discursive strategies used in texts, such as how people and events are referred to or what characteristics are attributed to them. The specific ideologically-loaded words and phrases found in these authentic texts will be used to write 9 speeches representing different political positions on 3 subjects. Their audio recordings will be used in two experiments. In the first experiment, 30 experienced interpreters will be asked to interpret the speeches. The collected interpretations will be analysed using the same methods as the European Parliament speeches. In the second experiment, non-specialist participants will listen to recordings of the source texts and their interpretations from the previous stages. After each recording, the participants will rate the political orientation of the speaker using a specially adapted questionnaire. The mean scores for each recording will be calculated and the possible differences in scores of source texts and their interpretations will be analysed to assess if interpreting influences the ideological load of a political speech.

The innovative nature of the project lies in its combination of methods of Critical Discourse Studies and experimental methods of Interpreting Studies to approach a subject which has been thus far insufficiently studied in either discipline: the influence of interpreter mediation on the production and perception of ideologically loaded political discourse. While previous ideology-oriented studies of interpreted political discourse have focused solely on existing texts (e.g. Beaton-Thome 2013), this project uses such texts as a starting point to two experimental stages which will allow for greater control over the key factor – the ideological load of the speech.