The Choice of Language for Note-taking for Consecutive Interpreting: A Polish Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give some thoughts on note-taking for consecutive interpreting, namely the issue of the choice of language in which the notes are taken. Apart from various graphic symbols and different types of shortened forms of words, an interpreter may choose the shortest words possible from the languages he or she knows that for some reasons might seem convenient in a given context. We would like to present a short comparison of the languages that we have at least basic command of (Polish, English, Swedish and Finnish) from the perspective of note-taking. It features a short analysis of the characteristic features of a given language in relation to others (with most focus put on Swedish and Finnish as opposed to the commonly used English) and the possible use of them in interpreting and interpreter training, also including the instances where students do not necessarily speak the language from which a given note-taking suggestion is drawn. The aim is to focus on some aspects that would broaden the array of note-taking tips for interpreting students that could be expanded by scholars working with other languages.

Keywords: note-taking, language, consecutive interpreting, Finnish, Swedish

1 Introduction

Note-taking for consecutive interpreting has been the subject of different studies and analyses, just to mention the seminal works of Rozan (2002), Seleskovitch (1975) or Gillies (2007). Some of those studies have been devoted to both the descriptive and the prescriptive aspects of producing notes and on teaching how to prepare them. The aspect of the choice of language for note-taking purposes has also been discussed, the focus being mainly on the relation source language/target language or A language/B language; however, some studies have also mentioned the possible application of a third language for the purposes of note-taking, just to mention Jones (1998) or Dam (2004).

In this article we would like to present some initial thoughts on the use of a third language, in a specific combination of languages. The issue has been analysed from the perspective of two native speakers of Polish, with English as their B language. The third

language for one of the authors is Swedish, while for the other it is Finnish. The very idea of such a discussion arose from personal experience of one of us, who surprisingly observed that he started to use Swedish expressions in note-taking in Polish-English/English-Polish consecutive interpreting tasks. This led to some thoughts on whether the third language could be applied for the purposes of note-taking and how that would depend on the particular language combination. We would like to present some basic thoughts on this subject, which may lead to further studies and possible applications in interpreter training programmes.

2 Basic distinction of abbreviating strategies for note-taking

It is obvious that preparing notes for consecutive interpretation requires significant summarisation of the text to convey only the most important aspects of it, as "in consecutive interpreting it is appropriate (or even necessary) to condense the information. This is why the techniques that are required are so specific" (Alcandre 1998: 88). In this paper we would like to focus only on what is being written, omitting other crucial aspects of note-taking, such as anticipation. We divide these solutions into three basic categories of data condensation: using symbols, using abbreviations and using expressions in other languages.

Symbols and abbreviations have a long history in note-taking and note-taking training. They have generally been used to signify expressions that are often repeated in speeches on various subjects. Gillies (2007: 125) points out that it is good to use symbols because "they may be written faster and easier than words, they are easier to read than words, they represent notions, not exact words, so it is easier to avoid target language interference." Virtually every graphic sign can be used as a symbol for the purposes of note-taking and the meaning might be dependent of the context in which the symbol is used, e.g. > representing a relation of one object to another (*A* > *B*, i.e. "A is bigger/stronger/better etc. than B"), † standing for either for "church" and "clergy" in general or for a "deceased person", etc.

As for abbreviation, Rozan (2002: 16) wrote in his seminal work that "the rule of thumb is that unless the word is short (4–5 letters) the interpreter should note it in an abbreviated form", giving the example of "specialised" shortened to *sp*^{ed} or *spec*. Various phonetic simplifications, like *U* signifying "you", *b4* standing for "before" or *oðə* meaning "other" might also be encountered. Just as in the case of symbols, everything depends on the creativity of the interpreter. Both these strategies (using symbols and using abbreviation) are an efficient and time-saving way of taking notes concerning different concepts.

The third category, generally labelled here as "using expressions in other languages" can be interpreted as the use of single words from a different language than the one that the notes are made in, regardless of whether they are prepared in source or target language. This method is obviously related to general decisions about the choice of language for note-taking and different approaches to that matter.

3 Views on the choice of language for note-taking

There are two stances adopted by researchers in this field – one group recommends using the target language, while the other advocates the use of the source language. Dam (2004: 4) briefly summarises the arguments used by both groups:

> Those who recommend using the target language do so basically for two reasons: for one thing, the target-language option logically forces the interpreter to move away from the surface form of the incoming speech and should therefore ensure better processing of the speech; for another, writing in the target language is thought to facilitate production of the target speech. The relatively smaller group of authors who question the TL recommendation tend to do so on the grounds that writing notes in the target language requires language conversion during note-taking and therefore adds to the number of functions that the interpreter has to perform during the listening phase.

Rozan (2002: 16) seems to belong to those that favour taking notes in target language, but does not stress this view very strongly – "preferably in the target language, although this is not essential." The other option may be backed by Gile (1995), but again there is no strong statement about which option is definitely better. He claims that because of the processing capacity necessary for conversion, using the target language may be "an unwise choice", but adds that "until empirical evidence is available, it is difficult to say which of the positions, equally valid in theory, is more of practical value" (Gile 1995: 182–183).

All these views seem to refer to the general choice of the language (i.e. the choice of the language for the whole of the noted text) and focus on two languages – the source language and the target language. However, there appears the question of preparing "mixed" notes – the choice of language for the given ideas or expressions would be dependent on the linguistic features of those expressions in the given language, or even on the features of the language itself. In other words, it would be based on the convenience of the use of a given solution at the moment of taking notes. In real situations it often appears that professional interpreters and students switch languages while preparing notes for their speeches.

Another aspect is the possible presence of the third language – the presence of non-symbolic expressions from neither source nor target language. Introducing the third language into note-taking may be criticised for raising the possibility of getting confused by the notes, but it appears that it is used in some cases – the question of whether it can be of any help is open, depending on the use. For example, Jones (1998: 60) states that

> interpreters may choose to note things in any way they want, just for reasons of convenience, and may even wish to use words from a third language, perhaps because those words are very short and easy to note in that language, or because the interpreter has lived for a long time in the culture of that third language [...].

Dam (2004: 5) mentions that in previous note-taking studies that explicitly addressed the issue of the choice of language there had been instances of words from a third language. The same situation appeared in Dam's own study, where the third language was

present in some of the cases and even amounted to 16% of the whole text in one instance (2004: 6).

Although it is hardly possible to draw any conclusions from this, the situation suggests that third language does appear in notes for consecutive interpretation, at least in some cases. This may be highly idiosyncratic, depending on the number of languages that the given interpreter has command of, his/her interpreter training and professional experience, or absolutely arbitrary factors, e.g. individual preference.

4 The choice of language in Polish/English/Swedish language combination

The sample language combination presented here is dscussed from a perspective of a person, who is a native speaker of Polish and works with English in both directions, while Swedish is a language that the person has at least a basic command of. Obviously this combination features two Germanic languages which are substantially similar in some grammatical and lexical aspects, whereas the third one belongs to a different group and does not bear much linguistic resemblance to the other two. Moreover, complex inflection and relatively long words may make the Polish language look rather difficult to prepare notes in an environment where brevity is a vital factor – an interpreter that is taking notes in Polish very often has to resort to excessively abbreviating the words and/or avoiding grammatical rules, which, because of the nature of the Polish language, may hamper the rendering of the source information more than it is in the case of other languages (i.e. Polish conjugation vs English conjugation).

In such a situation, switching into another language may be some sort of a solution, focusing on the aforementioned importance of the shortness of words. English words, such as *I*, *OK* or *go*, are often used by interpreters, regardless of the language pair in which they are working – this is probably because of the form of these expressions and their universal character, which makes them useful for note-taking.

In this respect, the Swedish language appears to have similar qualities that in some cases even surpass the English solutions. Below is a sample table of selected expressions that are very likely to appear in speeches on various subjects. They may provide good note-taking solutions for interpreters working in the presented language combination. Verbs are in infinitive, Polish noun gender is masculine; during the selection the main focus was placed on Swedish words:

Table 1. Sample list of commonly used words in Polish, English and Swedish

Polish	**English**	**Swedish**
niezadowolony / wściekły	angry	arg
część	part	del
kosztowny / drogi	expensive	dyr
następnie / wtedy	then	då
może	may	få
dać	give	ge
posiadać / mieć	have	ha
na miejscu / w kraju / w domu	home	hem
ponownie / znowu	again	igen
kryzys	crisis	kris
spotkanie	meeting	möte
możliwy	possible	möjlig
obecnie / teraz / dziś	now	nu
nowy	new	ny
zobaczyć / widzieć	see	se
trudny	difficult / hard	svår
przyjmować / brać	take	ta
uważać / wierzyć / sądzić	believe	tro
młody	young	ung
przyjaciel / partner	friend	vän
rok / lata	year	år
wyspa	island	ö

In this presentation the main focus was put on commonly used expressions that are the easiest to note in Swedish. It provides some cases in which the difference in length is rather significant, with the Swedish *ö*, standing for the notion of "island", being the most striking example. This of course does not mean that this is a rule for all cases, it is easy to find a basic example where Swedish would not be the best (i.e. shortest) choice, e.g. Polish *robić* vs Swedish *göra* vs English *do*. Nevertheless, the table provides some

solutions that might be relevant for note-taking, being an alternative for using symbols or abbreviations, especially when mixed with the best choices from other languages.

For example, if one would want to note the simple expression signifying "I take", one could come up with several language-dependent options that would be the easiest to note (of course leaving graphic symbols aside). A distinction is made between the correct form of the expression and an abbreviated version that excludes the grammatical rules of the given language:

Table 2. Comparison of note-taking options for a selected expression

Polish proper	[ja] Biorę	5 letters (pronoun is optional because of conjugation)
Polish abbreviated	Ja brać	6 letters, pronoun + infinitive
English proper	I take	5 letters
English abbreviated	I take	5 letters, pronoun + infinitive
Swedish proper	Jag tar	6 letters
Swedish abbreviated	Jag ta	5 letters, pronoun + infinitive
Shortest possible	I ta	3 letters, English pronoun + Swedish infinitive

In this particular example, in this specific language combination, it turned out that the theoretically best non-symbol option is to use the English pronoun in combination with the Swedish verb in infinitive. Of course this combination is not a general rule for note-taking, and using such ungrammatical simplifications and frequent changes of language requires some experience, training and additional amounts of concentration so as not to get lost in one's own notes. But apart from that it shows the mechanisms that might prove effective in the long run if preceded by adequate training that could develop the desired, individual model of note-taking that would be as free from ambiguity as possible (Santulli 2002: 263). Probably much would also depend on personal preferences, but suggesting such a method of creating multilingual notes might prove to be a reasonable alternative for some adepts of interpreting.

Research based on notes of interpreters/interpreting students working with such a language combination and having different languages as their mother tongue (a study similar to the one conducted by Dam 2004) could possibly give some other interesting information – it would provide information on the statistical proportions of the choice of language. If it was accompanied by performing interpretation and receiving interpreter feedback concerning their own notes, it could also provide some hints regarding possible confusion caused by operating in three languages at the same time. This could lead to the formulation of new hypotheses regarding the choice of language.

5 The choice of language in Polish/English/Finnish language combination

But what if a language at our disposal does not have short words that could be used as a whole, i.e. without abbreviating them? We would like to suggest that there are also other ways of making use of various aspects of languages, which we would like to demonstrate with the example of Finnish. The language is known for its tendency to create long compound words, a fact which is attested among others by such monstrosities as the Finnish 'lentokonesuihkuturbiinimoottoriapumekaanikkoaliupseerioppilas' that translates as 'technical warrant officer trainee specialized in aircraft jet engines'. This is of course an extreme example of what a Finnish derivational system is capable of, but even in the case of basic vocabulary Finnish does not appear too tempting as can be seen from the following chart, which contrasts Finnish words with their aforementioned Swedish counterparts (Table 3):

Table 3. The comparison of Swedish and Finnish expressions

Swedish	Finnish
nu	nyt
ny	uusi
se	katsoa/nähdä
svår	vaikea
ta	ottaa
tro	uskoa
ung	nuori
vän	ystävä
år	vuosi
ö	saari

As can be seen, the Finnish words are longer and as such do not serve very well the purpose of efficient note-taking. This does not mean, however, that an interpreter using Finnish as his B or C language is fighting a losing battle if he or she decides to use Finnish to increase the efficiency of note-taking.

Some consolation may be, for example, found in the Finnish morphological system. Finnish has 15 cases, 6 of which are labelled as 'local' in the sense of being prototypically used for describing spatial relations. The system is rather neat as the external cases have their internal counterparts. The pairs go as follows:

1) ellative or 'out of sth' case, represented by the ending -stA[1]
   ablative or 'from the surface of sth' case, represented by the ending -ltA;
2) illative or 'into sth', represented by the ending -VV[2]n
   allative or 'onto the surface of sth', represented by the ending -lle;

3) inessive or 'inside sth' case -ssA
   adessive or 'on the surface of sth' case -llA.

Such a division allows for a very precise description of movement. Those suffixes seem therefore a rather interesting alternative to arrows and lines, which are often used to represent spatial movement. Thus, instead of having (fig. 1)

Roosevelt
Tokio ----------> Warsaw

to describe the journey of Roosevelt from Tokio to Warsaw we may decide to represent the journey as:

Roosevelt
Tokio:st Warsaw:aan,

which in our opinion may be much less equivocal than the conventional arrow.[3]

Another interesting feature of Finnish morphology that may prove useful is the passive present participle with the ending -ttAvA. It has three meanings:
1) something that is being or is usually done
2) something that can be done
3) something that has to be done.

The one which is of interest to use is the third of these alternatives. It expresses obligation and can be abbreviated to a three letter symbol-like form, namely 'ttv'. Obligation is a phenomenon quite likely to appear in many situations and contexts, so the following notation can be considered as quite a handy one:

sth wash:ttv – sth that has to be washed
sth send:ttv – sth that has to be sent
sth watch:ttv – sth that has to be watched

and more unequivocal in its meaning than, e.g. the analogous English 'sth to wash/send/watch', as this way of notation offers possible additional readings.[4]

6 Possible application and further research

Issues and solutions analysed in this paper are language-specific, i.e. the observations are limited only to the selected languages and combinations of languages. This suggests that the possible future studies developing this issue would be mostly focused on these language combinations, but this does not mean that the findings and suggestions would be limited only to these specified circumstances.

As projected now, the application of these observations and further research might be developed in two fields. One would be the search for any possible application of the so-

lutions drawn from languages that received the most attention in this in this article (Swedish and Finnish); transferring some solutions for the purposes of interpreting courses conducted in other languages. The assumption behind the other direction is to analyse various features of any third language that might be used in any interpreting course. In other words, do other languages that can be used in the given interpreting classroom environment possess features that may be useful for note-taking?

The first direction may seem problematic, but one must take into account that by no means this should take the form of an elementary course in another language. When considering Swedish, there would be a possibility of introducing some of the expressions presented in this article as "parasymbols" that may be offered to students as an alternative to traditional, graphic symbols and a shorter option than words in either of the languages used in the course. This idea was expressed by Gillies (2007: 133–134), who proposed short words from other languages, such as *ergo,* French *il y a,* Polish *bo* [because] etc., as an alternative notation of some expressions.

Of the examples from Swedish quoted in Table 1 some seem to be promising as potential symbols in this sense – most notably *ö,* the shortest possible way to express the notion of "island" using the alphabet, and probably requiring less hand movements than a symbol. *Nu*, *ny*, *ha* or *ta* might be a shorter alternative to *now*, *new*, *have* and *take* respectively, being easy to recall because of visual similarity to the English equivalents. *År* [year] or *då* [then] might look attractive and eye-catching for non-Scandinavian users because of the diacritic, and so forth.

The didactic conclusions of this might be implemented into interpreter training programmes. The problem that remains in Poland is the lack of the sufficient number of interpreting students with this specific (Polish-English-Swedish) language combination. Nevertheless, the ideas shall be introduced in current conditions as general suggestions for note-taking, regardless of the languages used by the students of the programmes (see the issue of introducing "parasymbols" mentioned above).

Of course, the same goes for the Finnish examples, where the word-endings may be an interesting alternative to traditional symbols such as arrows for indicating movement. This is just a set of possible additions to the catalogue of symbols, which somehow deprives these words of their character – if used, they would be more of a symbol than actual presence of a third language.

The inclusion of the third language is the other aspect of the possible further research concerning choice and switches of language in note-taking for consecutive interpretation. This work presented some ideas on taking advantage of the features of Swedish and Finnish, but obviously there might be other – some similar, some completely different – features of other languages, just like the aforementioned solutions drawn from French. There is a possibility that every language possesses either very useful, short words or any other features that facilitate preparing notes. Studies may also focus on (the positive or negative consequences) of the mere inclusion of the third language into interpreter training classes – this article should work as a stimulus for further work for

researchers dealing with the described language combination and other languages of the world. It is the creativity of researchers that determines the potential findings of future studies.

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[1] Capital A stands for either /æ/ or /a/, depending on the vowel harmony.
[2] VV stands for reduplicating the vowel in the stem. There are exceptions to this rule (cf. relevant sections in Karlsson 1987).
[3] It may be argued that the transparency of our proposal is somehow dimmed by the fact that those endings have also their non-prototypical (i.e. non-spatial meanings), but this is probably obviated if we have place names and in particular if the point of departure and the destination are put next to each other.
[4] For example, it is not immediately clear whether 'a film to watch' is meant to express obligation 'It is a film to watch' or an aim as in 'a film to watch, is what we want to do' (which is stylistically suspicious, but not something inconceivable).