

Linguistic Analysis of Note-taking Strategies in Consecutive Interpretation Based on Saussure's Structuralism

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Abstract: Note-taking is simultaneously a key feature and a widely used tool in consecutive interpretation. Based on Saussure's Structuralist Linguistics, this essay attempts to evaluate current studies and strategies of CI note-taking and generate further understanding of note-taking procedure from a linguistic perspective. It is interested in three key aspects: theoretical explanation of the course of note-taking, theoretical analysis of current note-taking methods, and developing criteria for note-taking effectiveness. By correlating and analyzing Saussure's theory and note-taking studies, this essay will approach these aspects in the following sections. It develops three continua to identify the key aspects of different note-taking strategies: the diversity of symbols, the length and number of words, and the preference for either words or symbols. The conclusion suggests that all CI note-taking strategies are fundamental variations of the distribution of two key resources, cognitive load and time, to achieve two objectives: to serve as auxiliary memory and language reminder. The three continua represent two basic features of notes: volume and language dependency. Despite different focuses on various strategies, practitioners are suggested to adopt a method suitable for their specific capabilities.

Keywords: note-taking, consecutive interpreting, structuralism, Saussure

1. Introduction

Note-taking has been perceived as a critical skill in consecutive interpretation (CI) since the mid-20th century. Especially in "classic" CI, systematically using and teaching note-taking is a topic with many debates and discussions. These studies are conducted in various directions. The majority consists of empirical analyses and case studies, in which the instructions on note-taking, or the principles, are developed and reviewed [1]. Some studies are inspired by problems occurring in interpretation education and concluded different suggestions to practitioners and learners compared to earlier studies [1]. One of the most recent and fruitful directions is cognitive studies. These behavioral and cerebral case studies reveal new quantitative domains in note-taking studies and generate insights unseen in empirical studies [1].

However, in the linguistic area, although there are Kirchoff [2] and Gile [3] who shed light on constructing a linguistic explanation of note-taking process in CI, the integration with existing linguistic theories still needs to be improved. This essay attempts to approach note-taking in CI based on the structuralism perspective of Ferdinand de Saussure, developed in the Course in General Linguistics [4]. It is interested in three key aspects: (1) theoretical explanation of the course of note-taking, (2) theoretical analysis of current note-taking methods, and (3) developing criteria for note-

taking effectiveness. By correlating and analyzing Saussure's theory and note-taking studies, this essay will approach these aspects in the following sections.

2. Main Body

2.1. Theory Construction

2.1.1. Background

Saussure's Structuralism is systematically developed in the *Course in General Linguistics* [4]. Being highly consistent and pioneering, there are many necessary elements in its chain of logic. Among these, considering the relevance to CI note-taking, two general areas are selected as the basis of the analysis in this essay: semiology and synchronic linguistics.

Due to the undefined and dynamic nature of language, a frame of reference is required to do effective research in this domain. Therefore, Saussure's system comprises many dyads, for instance, language and speech, synchronic and historical linguistics, and syntagmatic and associative relations. The research subjects, or the elements of language, are approached within such dyads, usually by contrasting each other, so they are both scientifically and realistically analyzed.

Among these binary oppositions, the foundation of Saussure's semiotics is the signifier and the signified. In his discourse, the communication course is the bilateral exchange of the signified (the abstract thought) and the signifier (the actual language used). Based on the assumption that signs are artificial yet arbitrary, he argues that correlations do not necessarily exist between the signifier and the signified. For exceptions, including onomatopoeic words in phonograms and picture-like symbols in ideograms, he also emphasizes the arbitrary part rather than the reasonable part because it is widely seen that the same object is depicted differently in different languages. This implication of linguistic relativity further supports his rejection of the idea that semiotics is about the word and "the thing it names." One of his examples is "arbor" ("tree" in Latin). "Arbor" may refer to a specific tree or the concept of trees, depending on the context. More precisely, it is the "sound image" of a psychological concept. In this manner, the system referred to as Structuralism today is established.

2.1.2. Structuralist Explanation of CI Note-taking

Note-taking is considered a necessary and symbolic feature in CI [5]. It has been systematically researched as an interpretation tool since the 20th century. However, before further looking into specific note-taking strategies, it is essential to understand the process of taking notes in CI through the lens of Saussure's structuralism.

Typically, CI note-taking bridges the original speech and the target speech. It is nearly simultaneously done with the original speech. The interpreter notes the gist of the speech, usually using the same language [1], with both words and symbols. Accordingly, the interpreted speech in the target language is produced also with reference to the memory of the interpreter. This is a complete cycle of original speech – note – target speech.

A semiotical rendition of this cycle can be as follows. The objective of the interpreter is to convey the signified collective X implicated in the original speech (signifier collective A) to the client by producing the target speech in another language (signifier collective B). The note is another signifier collective a the interpreter creates to aid the transmission from A to B.

Naturally, the ideal situation is $X=A$, $a \subseteq A$, $A=B$ for the interpreter, and $B=X$ for the client. In practice, however, some procedures may become challenging. In Saussure's idea, the "speech circuit" comprises three elements: the language, the speech and the brain. The collective A, while comprehended basically under the restriction of a language system, always contains personal elements as any speech would. When the original speaker is accustomed to a highly individual

expression manner, the gap between speech and language can be extended. Similarly, producing and understanding the target speech also faces this challenge. Moreover, in the perspective of regarding language as a social fact, the three brains involved in the interpretation may be three different mindsets from different social communities, further increasing the difficulty.

More precisely, the purpose of note-taking is to ensure that $a \subseteq X$ and $X=B$. Although it is not the solitary factor that affects the degree of matching between X , A , and B , the procedure of producing a is also part of the production of B . In addition to the function of exterior memory, when taking notes, the initial step of generating a speech in the target language has already started [6].

The procedure $A - a - B$ can be further broken down into two parts: $A - a$ and $a - B$, and they are the essential parts that note-taking studies seek to improve [1]. In contrast to translation, which directly processes $A - B$, interpretation note-taking breaks the continuity of the original and target text. Under the universally accepted rule of noting ideas instead of words [7], the fragmented notes destroy the syntagmatic relations in the original speech, leaving only associative (or paradigmatic in contemporary terms) relations for the interpreter. This implicates the linguistic import of notes as the in-absentia reminders that interpreters rely on to search for the correct signifiers in a different language and construct another set of syntagma. Practically speaking, this means that the form and method of note-taking may directly impact the form and method of the interpreted speech [8].

To sum up, there are two primary roles of note-taking: auxiliary memory and language reminder. The note should reflect the original speech with adequate precision in $A - a$, and should be logically and linguistically clear for the interpreter to speak fluently and accurately in $a - B$. Although notably, the limit of time is also a decisive factor that restrains the method of note-taking, the concentration of this essay, being a linguistic analysis, will be mainly on quality instead of timeliness. It is still, however, an inevitable aspect of judging the method of note-taking.

In the following section, examples of note-taking strategies will be examined to understand the practical side of note-taking studies better.

2.2. Review and Analysis

2.2.1. The Development of Note-taking Strategy

The beginning of a systematic note-taking strategy may be the introduction of Rozan's (2002) seven principles: 1. Noting the idea and not the word; 2. The rules of abbreviation; 3. Links; 4. Negation; 5. Adding emphasis; 6. Verticality; 7. Shift. This is believed to be one of the fundamental works in interpreting in Western Europe [7]. The primary principle, according to Rozan [7], noting the idea and not the word, is reflected and supplemented in later works, including Matyssek [9] and Gillies [10]. From the perspective of this essay, the structuralist understanding of note-taking is mainly reflected by the first and third principles.

The first principle suggests to prioritize the import of the "concept" [10] beyond the words. To note the idea of the speech, interpreters are required to process and comprehend the speech before taking notes. In structuralist words, this principle encourages interpreters to focus on X in procedures $A - a$, so that the signified X is less degraded in procedure $a - B$. For instance, for "it could end up disastrous", noting "probable" is better than "could," as the word "probable" is solitarily closer to the original signified X , which in this scenario can be described as the probability that something is disastrous, while using a single "could" may lead to uncertainty, given the contextual nature of modal verbs.

The third principle emphasizes that "an idea can be distorted completely if its relation to the previous idea is not clearly indicated" [7], so it is paramount to note the links between different elements. As is discussed in the last section, involving the intermediary a undermines the continuity

between A and B. To restore the necessary syntagmatic relations in the original speech, linking words and symbols may significantly reduce the risk of inaccuracy.

After the early period of systematic note-taking studies, according to Chen [1], with the development of interpretation didactics, the “prescriptive” note-taking strategies and studies gradually turned to “descriptive.” Despite the Rozan-style principles in CI guidebooks such as Ahrens and Orlando [11], in actual didactics, it is more common to see individualized methods of note-taking. Some critiques of systematic note-taking principles do not recognize note-taking as fundamental in CI, and suggest the principles are inadequately specific [12].

Nonetheless, a coordinate system can still be drawn to locate and identify different methods of note-taking, regardless of the intense individuality. The binary method of Saussure shows its value in this situation. There are three continua, which include three essential aspects of any note-taking method: the continuum of the number of symbols used, the continuum of the number of words used, and the continuum of using either words or symbols. They may serve as three axes of the coordinate system.

2.2.2. Continuum of Less or More Kinds of Symbols

The number of different symbols that note-taking should utilize is the most debated among the three continua. In this controversy, the polar are respectively Rozan and Matyssek [1]. While Rozan [7] suggests only 10 “indispensable” symbols, the symbol corpus of Matyssek covers an entire volume of the book [1]. This vast difference results in various discussions and controversies. Ilg and Lambert [12] argue that the overuse of symbols may intensify the cognitive load of interpreters, which is against the very purpose of note-taking.

From a structuralist perspective, symbols in CI note-taking can be seen as a special system of speech. It is the individual deviation from common languages deliberately designed to accelerate and improve the noting course. Although it is not a system related to the sound image which is the essential feature of the signifier according to Saussure [4], its function and purpose are similar to that of speeches in general. And if this system grows massive and complicated, it can be legitimate to be considered as another system equal to a language. However, the fact that any symbol system in note-taking does not reflect any existing languages means that the connection between the signified and the signifier for symbols is less conventional than that of words. This language neutrality may not be an issue as symbols are sometimes intuitive depictions of logical relations, for example, an upward arrow for “increase.” But when it comes to less intuitive and more complicated concepts like some time “ago,” the symbol referring to this concept may be significantly different for different individuals. In such situations, interpreters may standardize and memorize their own symbol corpus to not cause any confusion. Potentially, this can be an additional cognitive load if the interpreter’s grasp of the symbol system is not adequately proficient, as the volume of Matyssek’s system is criticized [12]. Yet despite these drawbacks, the benefit of symbols is obvious. They are easier to write and decipher as they are intuitively closer to the signified.

2.2.3. Continuum of Length and Number of Words

Abbreviations are commonly used and emphasized in note-taking. In Rozan’s [7] second principle, he suggests the noted words should not exceed 5 letters and puts forward abbreviation rules for less confusion and better efficiency. That said, in some case studies, it is found that longer and more words may lead to better output to some extent. Cardoen [8] points out that the number of words positively correlates to fluency and negatively to accuracy, while more abbreviations and fewer full words correlate to better accuracy, sacrificing fluency.

The structuralist rationale of abbreviations is similar to that of symbols. They are both customized semiotic systems adopted from languages that could be included in Saussure's category of speeches. Yet, there is still a divergence between abbreviations and symbols. As is discussed in the last section, effective symbol systems in practice are usually prepared and standardized. Abbreviations, on the contrary, are more casually created during the course of noting and are highly language-dependent [8]. They do not create novel semiotic relations between the signifier and the signified as the symbols. Instead, they directly correspond to respective words. For instance, as Rozan [7] suggests, "Pron, Prer, Prct, Prvity" may be easily understood as production, producer, product, and productivity without confusion and hesitation. Due to such language dependency, longer abbreviations and more words may reproduce the syntagmatic relations and keep more signifiers unchanged in the source speech, reducing the gap between A and a, so that during a – B there is a more direct correspondence between signifiers, reducing the time of re-analyzing X. In the extreme condition, which means a = A, the procedure a – B then becomes sight translation. Therefore, the disadvantage of longer and more words is less concentration on X, because a major part of time and focus is distributed to copying A the signifier. This may explain the reported loss of accuracy with more full words in the note by Cardoen [8].

2.2.4. Continuum of Symbols Against Words

After the discussions in the previous sections, this continuum can be restated as the degree of language dependency. The "deverbalisation" approach of the School of Paris Hermeneutics is an example of a lower preference for language-dependent notes, or more use of symbols against words [13]. According to Nai's [13] examples, to strengthen the "focus on meaning", the use of words is avoided in most cases, and if necessary, there are only abbreviations of less than 4 letters, and the majority of notes consist of symbols, both idiomatic and standardized ones.

This "deverbalization" approach can be seen as an attempt to achieve a more direct correlation during X – A – a – B by completely replacing A with a purposefully designed system of a. In this case, a and A are parallel collectives that are both supposed to represent X, so the course can be simplified to X – B. By doing this, however, the interpreter must spare more efforts on conceiving X from A, and by completely abandoning A as a handy source of signifiers, the formation of a becomes an independent step where the interpreter relies completely on associative relations to connect a to X. This escalates the complexity of note-taking, as a system of symbols can be equivalent to a third language, and it is more likely to suffer from information loss. As Nai [13] reports, unskilful note-takers may invest too much resources in writing and understanding symbols, significantly affecting the quality and pace of interpreting. Yet, if this skill is mastered, it could be a strong aid for the fast and precise generation of notes and target speech [13].

3. Conclusion and Suggestion

This essay attempts to approach current note-taking studies from a linguistic perspective based on Saussure's structuralism. The following points are discovered. In general, it can be concluded that all CI note-taking strategies are fundamentally variations of the distribution of two key resources, cognitive load and time, in order to achieve two objectives: to serve as auxiliary memory and language reminder. The three continua represent two essential features of notes: volume and language dependency. A greater volume of notes serves as better language reminders by consuming more time and increasing cognitive loads. Less language dependency saves time while sacrificing the role of language reminder. Both styles of note-taking, if conducted properly, can be equally effective as auxiliary memory.

Therefore, for interpretation practitioners, it is difficult to conclude which aspect is a “better” focus for CI note-taking, as it is more of a balance between different objectives. But for people learning interpretation, if they can locate their strengths and weaknesses, it may be essential to focus on a specific aspect and adapt a note-taking method accordingly.

However, as the structuralist system of Saussure was developed more than 100 years ago, the theory basis of this essay needs to be updated. Structuralist linguistics has seen considerable evolution after the publication of *Course in General Linguistics*. Although the fundamental rationales of Saussure, such as the signifier and signified, are of significant value today, some analyses in this essay may be improved by adapting to more contemporary linguistics methodologies. More practical suggestions are expected in further analysis from linguistic perspectives.

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