DEVELOPING NOTE-TAKING SKILLS IN CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETING

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Abstract: Note-taking is an important skill in consecutive interpreting. Intended only for the interpreter’s immediate use as a memory-efficiency supplement, it is especially individual and therefore unfathomable to some extent. In the present author’s opinion, however, it still has some kind of system. Once the interpreter has developed good skills in note-taking, he or she may be regarded as having formed a particular note-taking system, which can be guided by some principles. This paper presents Rozan’s seven basic principles and some practical hints from some veteran interpreters to help would-be interpreters develop good skills in note-taking. The present author also points out that good skills can only be achieved through sufficient practice.

Key Words: note-taking; Chinese-English consecutive interpreting; principles; practice

I. Introduction

Interpreting takes place when one person translates orally what he or she hears into another language. Generally speaking, interpreting assumes two widely used forms—simultaneous and consecutive. In simultaneous interpreting the interpreter makes the audience hear the interpretation at the same time as the speech is made, while in consecutive interpreting the interpreter is required to interpret between chunks of the original speech (or rather, immediately after the original speaker has completed a few connected sentences or, in most cases, a fairly long paragraph). Since
consecutive interpreting needs no well-equipped booths and sophisticated wiring system, it is much more widely used on various occasions.

Obviously, consecutive interpreting involves many skills of an interpreter, for example, knowledge of the language, listening, memory, concentration, understanding, note-taking, etc. Among all these skills, note-taking is in the central position, as the original speaker could keep on speaking for about 15 minutes and the interpretation is usually required to be a complete rendition of the original speech rather than a summary in another language. Without note-taking, one can hardly do a good job. For an interpreter, one notable advantage of consecutive interpreting is also that he or she has more time to think and take notes so as to translate more accurately.

Although note-taking is quite necessary to consecutive interpreting, paradox can be that note-taking is also regarded as “evil” because it may split the power of attention and interfere in one’s listening. Especially for beginners of consecutive interpreting, note-taking is a rather frustrating job. Nevertheless, good skills can be developed through sufficient practice under the guide of the principles concerning note-taking in interpreting. To begin with, let us take a look at the special features of note-taking in consecutive interpretation.

II. Two Special Features of Note-taking in Consecutive Interpretation

As note-taking in consecutive interpreting is intended only for the interpreter’s immediate use, it has two salient features which are quite different from what we usually take down in classes or meetings.

First, the purpose of note-taking is to increase memory efficiency, not to take down everything one has said. Only with high memory efficiency can the interpreter ensure accuracy in work. As too much note-taking in interpreting may reduce rather than increase memory efficiency, it should not be overused. One should always bear in mind that it is not note-taking but rather memory on the basis of correct comprehension that plays the key role of ensuring accuracy in interpreting. That being the case, note-taking in consecutive interpreting should only focus on such key
information as time, figures, proper names of persons and places, etc. that are mentioned in a speech.

Second, the interpreter’s notes are especially individual in character. Practising interpreters develop their own techniques for note-taking. Some use a great number of symbols while others hardly use any. One person’s notes would probably be totally unintelligible to any other reader. It is therefore not proper or feasible for a beginner to copy mechanically “a system of notes” used, say, by a veteran interpreter for years. A beginner should no more do so than a patient should use “a prescription prepared for someone else” (Zhong, 1984, p.45).

With the two special features of note-taking in consecutive interpretation made clear, one should now understand why beginners are not advised to take everything down or mechanically follow veteran interpreters. To those who are trained to be future interpreters, they should first aim at drawing on the experiences or ideas from veteran interpreters or researchers of interpretation to form a particular system of note-taking which is most suitable to themselves. For this purpose, the following section will present several useful principles put forward by some researchers and veteran interpreters.

III. Some Useful Principles in Note-taking

3.1 Rozan’s seven basic principles

Jean-Francois Rozan (1956, see Phelan, 2001, p.10) put together some ideas to help interpreters with the task of note-taking in his book *La prise de notes en consécutif*. Rozan established seven basic principles which are still useful today:

1. Note the idea rather than the exact words used.

2. Abbreviate long words by noting the first two and the last two letters only. Alternatively, find a short word with the same meaning.

3. Abbreviations of linking words are important:
   - as, why to mean because, as, given that, for this reason
   - tho although, despite
   - but however, nevertheless
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if                         supposing
as to                     as regards, regarding, concerning
ths                       thus, in other words, to conclude, in conclusion

4. Negation
OK                         to approve
no OK                      to disapprove

5. Underlying to stress importance or significance
int                        interesting
int                        very interesting
?                          an important questing

6. Work down the page. Group ideas intelligently. Use a line to separate ideas.
Number pages to avoid confusion. Cross off each section as you interpret it.

7. Symbols

*Symbols of expression*
:                        to express thought or belief
”                        to express what is said, declared or affirmed
⊙                        symbol of discussion
OK                       symbol of approbation

*Symbols of movement*
→                        A horizontal arrow indicates movement or communication. It can also be used to express leading to or providing with.
↗                        to express increase, development or progress.
↘                        to express decrease, reduction or decline

*Symbols or correspondence*
=                        to imply equality or correspondence
≠                        unlike, as against
+                        moreover, in addition

*Other Symbols*
□                        country, nation, national
☒                        international, foreign
Some of Razon’s ideas can be easily combined with the practice of Chinese-English interpreting. If applied flexibly, the principles can be of much help to the note-taking of Chinese speeches. For example, absorbing his idea of using symbols in note-taking, the Chinese-English interpreter can use the following easily recognized symbols to represent some Chinese expressions commonly used in diplomatic occasions:

- ∴ therefore
- ∵ because
- > greater than
- < less than
- HR Human Rights
- D developed countries
- d developing countries
- ○ socialism with Chinese characteristics

Clearly it is impossible to use abbreviations or symbols to represent every term and every word one might come across in interpreting. Razon’s seven basic principles of note-taking are worthwhile only when they can help the interpreter jot the speakers’ words down speedily and recall them immediately after the speech. Therefore, one should not mechanically memorize those principles, but rather regard them as a guide to the interpreting practice. To improve note-taking skills in interpretation, one should also learn from some veteran interpreters through practice.

**3.2 Practical hints from some veteran interpreters**

The following points concerning note-taking in interpreting are summarized from the experiences of some veteran interpreters. Though far from comprehensive, they are quite practical and therefore demand the beginners’ primary attention in
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practice:

1. Write as few words or symbols as possible. An interpreter should always concentrate on listening (for comprehension and transference). And, limited by the very little time at his or her disposal, the interpreter must practice the maxim of “economy in words” while taking notes. As a rule, the interpreter’s notes should be of such a type that each word or symbol usually represents a “key word” or a “sense group” or an important formulation, etc., leaving an appropriate space between two words or symbols so written. In short, the words or symbols so written should preferably be reduced to the minimum in number.

2. Better take notes in the target language. Most interpreters take notes in the target language rather than the source language as this approach saves time and effort when the time comes to deliver the interpretation. This approach also helps the interpreter to make a conscious effort to move away from the structures and expressions of the source language. Of course, there are also exceptions. When some expressions or phrases can be much more easily and briefly noted in one language other than the target language, it is not uncommon to find notes that are taken down with a mixture of the target language and the source language. Some notes also use many “neutral codes” (symbols that are used by both the target language and the source language), as their meanings are easier to be transferred both in the source language and the target language. Sometimes when we come across words which we do not understand or know its translation at the time of note-taking, we may jot them down in the source language and consider translating them later. Regardless of all these exceptions, generally speaking it is better to take notes in the target language, which will help solve the problems of translation as quickly as possible.

3. See to it that the notes are logical and legible. As far as possible, the interpreter should be able to make a logical analysis of the speech that is being made and to take notes accordingly. In this way, the speaker’s flow or sequence of ideas can be better grasped and noted and therefore better interpreted. At the same time, the
interpreter must see to it that the notes are legible. They must be easy to read, for the interpreter cannot afford the time to hesitate or meditate before deciphering them.

4. Note-taking in interpreting should not take the form of shorthand. This is because a time-consuming process of deciphering is needed if all the notes are taken in shorthand codes. Even the most experienced stenographer cannot be as quick and accurate as an interpreter when they decipher their own notes. Therefore, note-taking in consecutive interpreting had better use more words, which can be directly recognized. However, a small number of symbols are also useful. Some interpreters even create new symbols which are only known to themselves to help take notes more quickly. However, the principle of creating new symbols is that they should represent words or concepts that appear frequently. Once the symbols are created, the interpreter should practice using them repeatedly. Only when the interpreter may make quick responses to them can they be used in note-taking. In short, the interpreter should only use symbols which represent words or concepts that appear frequently and whose meanings he or she is very familiar with. Symbols can only serve as supplements; it can never take the place of words in note-taking.

5. Memory is expected to work simultaneously with note-taking. As noted earlier, note-taking is used to supplement memory efficiency. We can trust our notes no more than our memory. Accuracy in interpreting is only possible when we combine the two skills together. The process of note-taking should be accompanied by memory. Note-taking is not to interfere in memory.

As noted before, the interpreter’s notes are intended only for immediate use and especially individual in character, there is no certain mode for note-taking in consecutive interpreting. Even the same interpreter may take notes of different styles in different interpreting occasions. However, according to the practical conditions and making the best use of some basic principles concerning note-taking in consecutive interpreting, the beginner of interpretation can develop good note-taking skills, which can be regarded as his or her own note-taking system.
IV. Improving Note-taking Skills Step by Step

Good skills of note-taking in consecutive interpreting can only be developed step by step through practice. According to what has been discussed, an interpreter with good skills of note-taking should take notes quickly as well as comprehensively, which will help him or her to recall the original information immediately and interpret it without much loss. Therefore, his or her notes should be concise, logical and legible. To achieve this purpose, the interpreter should first and foremost make efforts to grasp the ideas of the original speaker with as few words or symbols as possible. In practice, one feasible way is to practice note-taking while interpreting a short paragraph several times, trying to reduce the number of words or symbols jotted down each time. As no beginners can take good notes at a single blow, they can only improve note-taking skills step by step.

Note-taking of the following paragraph can serve as a good example for the step-by-step improvement:

I’m very happy to have the privilege to attend the conference, and address the topic of “Change and Global Economy.” Throughout the history there have been periods characterized by themes. The theme that characterizes our age is rapid change. Advances in transportation, medicine, and the nature of political or commercial relationships have all changed rapidly, with great impact on societies across the world. We should remember the philosophical statement that “The art of progress is to preserve order amid change, and to preserve change amid order.”

Note-taking in the first time might be:

I (➔) pril to attd conf. & sp topic “chan & W eco”//

➔histo periods char. themes//

Theme char. our age= rapid chan//

↗trans, med, pol or TR chan fast/ big ↓ soc → W//

rem phil S: art of ↗: order in chan & chan in corder//

The above notes are logical and legible, but they are not very concise, hence time-consuming and not effective in real-life consecutive interpretation. Through a
step-by-step improvement, the final notes might be much more concise as follows:

\[ \text{attd conf. & sp "chan & W eco"} // \\
\text{histo char. themes} // \\
\text{Our age = fast chan} // \\
\text{\(\nearrow\) trans, med, pol or TR \(\downarrow\) soc W} // \\
\text{rem phil S: art of \(\nearrow\): order in chan & vv} // \\
\]

Improving note-taking skills step by step indicates that although there may be many useful principles and hints in consecutive note-taking, the training of such a basic skill in consecutive interpreting has no certain knacks, and all that beginners of consecutive interpretation need to do is to practice and build up experience every day. With sufficient practice, the interpreter can eventually take concise, logical and legible notes in an automatic way and with his or her own style. Only at that time can the interpreter be regarded as having formed a particular system of note-taking.

IV. Conclusion

Note-taking in consecutive interpreting contains a lot of paradoxes: It is both necessary and evil; both individual and principled; both helpful and obstructive to memory, etc. Some people regard note-taking in consecutive interpreting as unfathomable, while others think it has some kind of system. In the present author’s opinion, both arguments are reasonable but only partially correct. It is unfathomable, for it is highly individual in character and formed by one’s own traits of thinking and writing system. It has some kind of system, because it still follows some principles and one can form one’s own fixed system of note-taking. The only way to establish one’s “unfathomable” system of note-taking in consecutive interpreting is to have plenty of practice. Only practice makes a perfect interpreter.

REFERENCES


