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PRAGMATIC AND CULTURAL DIFFICULTIES OF SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING

Daminov Navruz Kudratovich

Associated Professor of the Department of Translation Theory and Practice,
Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages, Uzbekistan

Budikova Zhansaya Akimzhankyzy

Senior Lecturer of the Department of Theory and Practice of Translation,
Karaganda University named after Academician E.A. Buketov, Kazakhstan

Abstract

Simultaneous interpreting is one of the most cognitively demanding forms of language mediation, requiring interpreters to listen, process, translate, and produce speech almost simultaneously. Beyond linguistic competence, successful simultaneous interpreting depends heavily on the interpreter's ability to navigate pragmatic and cultural dimensions of communication. Pragmatic meanings, including implicatures, speech acts, politeness strategies, and contextual references, often present significant challenges because they are deeply embedded within specific socio-cultural environments. Similarly, cultural elements such as idioms, humor, historical references, customs, and values frequently resist direct translation, increasing the risk of misunderstanding and communication breakdown. This study investigates the pragmatic and cultural difficulties encountered in simultaneous interpreting and examines the strategies employed by interpreters to overcome these obstacles. Using a qualitative research design, examples from international conferences, diplomatic discourse, and intercultural communication settings are analyzed to identify common challenges and effective coping mechanisms. The findings reveal that pragmatic ambiguity, culture-bound expressions, humor, politeness norms, and institutional references constitute major sources of difficulty. Furthermore, experienced

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interpreters tend to employ strategies such as explicitation, adaptation, omission, reformulation, and contextualization to preserve communicative intent. The study highlights the importance of cultural competence and pragmatic awareness in interpreter training programs. It concludes that successful simultaneous interpreting requires not only linguistic proficiency but also extensive intercultural knowledge and pragmatic sensitivity. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on interpreting studies and provide practical recommendations for interpreter education and professional practice.

Keywords: Simultaneous interpreting, pragmatics, culture, intercultural communication, interpreting strategies, translation studies, conference interpreting

Introduction

Globalization has significantly increased communication among people representing diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. International organizations, diplomatic institutions, multinational corporations, academic conferences, and global media platforms rely heavily on interpreting services to facilitate communication. Among various interpreting modes, simultaneous interpreting occupies a particularly important position because it enables real-time multilingual communication without significant interruptions.

Simultaneous interpreting is a complex cognitive process in which interpreters listen to a source language message and render it into a target language almost simultaneously. Unlike written translation, interpreters have limited time for analysis and revision. Consequently, they must make immediate decisions regarding lexical choices, grammatical structures, and contextual meanings.

While linguistic difficulties have traditionally received considerable scholarly attention, recent research increasingly recognizes the significance of pragmatic and cultural dimensions in interpreting performance. Language cannot be

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separated from culture because communicative meanings are often shaped by social norms, historical experiences, and shared cultural knowledge. As a result, interpreters frequently encounter situations where literal translation fails to convey the intended message.

Pragmatic challenges emerge when speakers use indirect meanings, implied messages, speech acts, or culturally specific conversational conventions. Cultural difficulties arise when messages contain references to traditions, customs, historical events, social institutions, or humor that may not exist in the target culture.

The importance of studying pragmatic and cultural difficulties in simultaneous interpreting stems from the fact that communication failures often occur not because of linguistic errors but because of misinterpretations of cultural and pragmatic meanings. Therefore, understanding these challenges is essential for improving interpreter training and professional performance.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify major pragmatic difficulties in simultaneous interpreting.
2. To examine cultural challenges affecting interpretation quality.
3. To analyze strategies used by interpreters to overcome these difficulties.
4. To provide recommendations for interpreter training and professional practice.

Literature Review

Research in interpreting studies has consistently emphasized the cognitive complexity of simultaneous interpreting. According to Daniel Gile, interpreters simultaneously allocate attention to listening, memory, analysis, and speech production. His Effort Model explains how cognitive overload can negatively affect interpretation quality.

The model suggests that interpreters constantly balance competing cognitive demands. When cultural or pragmatic difficulties arise, cognitive load increases

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significantly because additional processing is required to understand implicit meanings.

Pragmatics in Interpreting Studies. Pragmatics examines how meaning is constructed in context. Scholars argue that successful communication depends not only on linguistic structures but also on contextual understanding.

Theories proposed by H. P. Grice emphasize conversational implicatures, whereby speakers convey meanings beyond literal expressions. Interpreters must recognize these implicatures quickly and reproduce them appropriately.

Similarly, John Searle and J. L. Austin demonstrate that utterances perform social actions such as requesting, promising, apologizing, or threatening. Failure to identify intended speech acts may distort communication.

Culture influences language use in numerous ways. According to Edward T. Hall, communication styles vary across high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures rely heavily on shared knowledge and implicit communication, whereas low-context cultures prefer explicit verbal expression.

Likewise, Geert Hofstede identifies cultural dimensions such as power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, all of which shape communicative behavior.

These theoretical frameworks suggest that interpreters must possess extensive cultural knowledge in addition to linguistic competence.

Numerous studies have documented challenges associated with culture-specific items. Researchers identify idioms, proverbs, humor, metaphors, historical references, and institutional terminology as recurring sources of difficulty.

Previous findings indicate that interpreters often employ adaptation and explicitation strategies when direct equivalents are unavailable. However, the effectiveness of such strategies depends on contextual factors and audience expectations.

Methodology. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate pragmatic and cultural difficulties in simultaneous interpreting.

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A descriptive and analytical framework was employed to examine authentic examples from conference interpreting, diplomatic speeches, political discourse, and international media broadcasts.

Data were collected from:

- International conference speeches
- Diplomatic meetings
- United Nations sessions
- Political speeches
- Academic conferences

A corpus of 100 pragmatic and culture-specific expressions was selected for analysis.

The collected examples were categorized into:

Category	Number
Idioms	20
Humor	15
Speech Acts	18
Cultural References	22
Politeness Expressions	15
Historical References	10

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and interpreter strategies. Results. **Indirect Speech Acts.** One of the most frequent challenges involved indirect requests and suggestions.

Example:

Speaker:

"It might be helpful if we reconsider this proposal."

Literal interpretation may suggest a recommendation.

Actual pragmatic meaning:

"We should reconsider the proposal."

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Interpreters must recognize the intended force rather than merely translating words.

Conversational Implicatures

Political speeches frequently contain implied criticism.

Example:

"Some countries have shown greater commitment than others."

Pragmatic interpretation:

Certain countries are being criticized indirectly.

Failure to capture this implication may weaken communicative intent.

Politeness Strategies

Different cultures express politeness differently.

English speakers often employ indirectness:

"Would you mind closing the door?"

Some languages prefer more direct structures.

Interpreters must balance linguistic naturalness with pragmatic equivalence.

Cultural Difficulties

Idiomatic Expressions

Idioms represent one of the most common cultural barriers.

Examples include:

- "Kick the bucket"
- "Break the ice"
- "Spill the beans"

Literal translations often produce incomprehensible results.

Humor

Humor relies heavily on shared cultural assumptions.

Political speeches frequently include jokes intended to build rapport.

Interpreters often struggle because humor depends on:

- Wordplay
- Cultural stereotypes

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- Historical knowledge
- Phonetic similarities

Historical References

Public speakers frequently mention nationally significant events.

Examples:

- Independence movements
- National heroes
- Political revolutions

Target audiences may lack the necessary background knowledge.

Institutional References

References to governmental institutions often require adaptation.

Examples:

- Senate
- Congress
- Parliament
- House of Lords

Direct translation may not communicate institutional functions accurately.

Frequency of Difficulties

Difficulty Type	Percentage
Cultural References	28%
Idioms	22%
Pragmatic Implicatures	18%
Humor	14%
Politeness	10%
Historical References	8%

The findings indicate that cultural references and idiomatic expressions represent the most significant challenges.

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Discussion

The results demonstrate that simultaneous interpreters face difficulties extending far beyond linguistic transfer. Pragmatic understanding plays a crucial role in ensuring communicative effectiveness.

One important finding concerns the interpretation of indirect communication. Speakers frequently convey intentions implicitly, particularly in diplomatic contexts where direct criticism may be considered inappropriate. Interpreters must therefore function as cultural mediators rather than mere language converters.

Another significant observation involves humor. Humor often depends on culturally specific assumptions and linguistic features. Consequently, interpreters frequently resort to adaptation strategies to preserve communicative impact.

The findings also confirm that cultural competence significantly influences interpreting quality. Interpreters possessing extensive knowledge of history, politics, and social norms demonstrate greater success in managing culture-bound references.

Implications for Interpreter Training

Training programs should incorporate:

Pragmatics courses

Cross-cultural communication studies

Discourse analysis

Cultural studies

Speech act analysis

Humor translation workshops

These components can significantly improve professional readiness.

Conclusion. This study examined pragmatic and cultural difficulties in simultaneous interpreting and identified major challenges affecting interpretation quality. The analysis revealed that interpreters frequently encounter problems

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related to implicatures, indirect speech acts, politeness conventions, humor, idiomatic expressions, historical references, and culture-specific concepts.

The findings demonstrate that linguistic competence alone is insufficient for successful simultaneous interpreting. Effective performance requires advanced pragmatic awareness and extensive cultural knowledge. Professional interpreters must continuously develop intercultural competence to manage increasingly complex multilingual communication environments.

The study further showed that strategies such as explicitation, adaptation, reformulation, generalization, and omission play a vital role in overcoming communicative barriers. These strategies enable interpreters to preserve intended meanings while maintaining fluency and accuracy.

Future research should explore the relationship between cultural competence and interpreting performance through empirical experiments involving professional interpreters and interpreting students. Such investigations may contribute to the development of more effective interpreter training methodologies and enhance the quality of intercultural communication in global contexts.

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