

MUSIC AND INTERPRETING: CROSSING OF MINDS

How music can affect the interpreter in the simultaneous vocational training

Silvia Velardi, IULM/Milano

1. Introduction

Musical abilities are generally regarded as an evolutionary by-product of more important functions such as those involved in language (Peretz, 2011). Indeed, much research has been carried out on the relationships that exist between music and language, asserting that there is a great deal these two domains of human behavior share (Mithen 2005, Besson 2001, Patel 2003, 2008); however, no attempt has yet been made to near music and interpreting fields, which share fascinating features in terms of cognitive skills.¹ The present study is part of an ongoing and larger PhD research project, whose aim is to discuss the role of research in interpreter education training from a methodological point of view (Pöchhacker 2004, Sawyer 2004). Although the overall objective of the research project is intended to answer the question of whether any crossed relationships among music – namely rhythm - language and simultaneous interpreting do exist, in this paper we will primarily concentrate on the work-in-progress pilot study itself, whose aim is rather to explore whether music training methodologies – exactly related to rhythm (Grahn 2009, Deutsch 1999, Marienberg 2011) – could support and improve simultaneous interpreting (SI) students' learning process and thus enhance their performative skills, in terms of interpreting strategies and prosodic features. A tentative outline of expected results will be also presented.

2. Why rhythm in interpreting: the theoretical framework

Perhaps it was like this, strange as it seemed, that whenever someone spoke to me, I may not have grasped the words, but I grasped the rise and fall of the notes! I knew what the person was like. Sound, the intonation of human speech, indeed of every living being, have had for me the deepest truth (Leoš Janáček, in Holloway 2002, 2).

¹ Private conversation with A. Patel (Senior Fellow at The Neurosciences Institute, San Diego) and R. Chaffin (Professor in Psychology of Music at University of Connecticut).

Like language, one of the reasons why music appears interesting and comprehensible is that it contains various kinds of structures that the human brain is capable of apprehending and organizing into hierarchically structured sequences (Patel 2003). As often claimed by many scientists, making sense of music is the process of discovering and representing its structure.

To explain why rhythm has been detected as the key feature pertaining to music and likely to help in SI, an overview of such a theoretical framework is needed. First of all, both music and language maintain an internal structure which seems to be divided into three types: phonological, syntactic and semantic (Sloboda 2005). This clearly means both systems always need to be stitched together in their parts, what might otherwise seem to be a disjointed sequence of elements into a meaningless stream of information. Likewise language, grouping mechanisms have been postulated in the domain of music (Deutsch 1999, Narmour 1990). By way of demonstration, language is a system in which letters are bound together into words, words are grouped into phrases and sentences, and sentences form paragraphs and discourse. On the other hand, music relies on the ability to bind together smaller elements into larger structures. In fact, notes are strung together to form melodic motifs, motifs are used to shape phrases, which in turn form songs or even movements of symphonies and become harmonies in the end. More clearly said, language is shaped on phonemes, words, sentences, paragraphs and discourses; in the same manner, music is the sum of sounds, motifs, phrases, sections and forms (Janata 2007).

Having run this fundamental parallel between music and language, the best evidence we have to this extent is that rhythm proves to be a common feature within the two systems, in terms of structure. What, then, of interpreting? Simultaneous interpretation is considered one of the most striking and challenging activity, consisting of various efforts, as stated by Gile (1985, 162): listening and analysis, speech production, and memory. But among the efforts a simultaneous interpreter needs to put in practice while performing a speech translation from a source language into a target language, is also the shaping of the uttered speech into a rhythmical structuring, in terms of voice intonation, way of speaking, fluency, all the more so, because the output is only perceived by listeners via headsets. According to Shlesinger, “the intonational system used in simultaneous interpretation appears to be marked by a set of salient features not found in any other language use” (Shlesinger 1994, 226). Even more important is that interpreters are often admonished to maintain a good rhythm while speaking, since it is a “conducive to information retrieval” (Alexieva 1988). Starting from this assumptions, our aim is trying to demonstrate that the application of rhythm to SI can prove to be effective, supporting students in their

performative skills in the booth. Our task is now to demonstrate how.

The present investigation, presented as follows, describes a twofold experiment designed, first, to isolate the features of prosody in interpretation as a distinctive mode of language use in simultaneous interpreting, and second, to examine the cumulative effect of rhythm on how well a text is perceived in terms of comprehension, recall and fluency.

3. The pilot study: method

3.1. Subjects

Twelve subjects at the beginning of the Second Cycle Degree at Iulm University of Milan will be divided into two homogeneous groups (control group – A group, and experimental group – B group), according to data emerging from a preliminary questionnaire investigating their musical experience and musical vocation. They are all native Italian speakers, and have English as B language.

3.1.1 Materials

Drawing on the same design, two experiments will be run. The first will be based on the translation of a 1'30" English speech selected from the European Parliament press archives; the second experiment will deal with a 1'30" rap song, with a much more complex structure in terms of slang and rapidity. Rhythm should be mainly helpful in a text rhythmically ambiguous like rap, thus more difficult to translate. As the cognitive load of students is under pressure in terms of listening and production, this could contribute to strengthen their capacity to fluently translate regular speeches afterwards. For both experiments, students will be asked to translate from B into A language, along the line established by Gile in the theory of Directionality (Gile 2005). Technical sound and audio splitting softwares, besides recording equipment will be used to isolate and segment rhythmical patterns of both units.

3.1.2 Procedure

Prior to the training and testing phase, all subjects will be given a multiple-choice questionnaire. The test will require them to express their musical aptitudes in terms of musical experience and vocation. Both the speech and the rap song will be rhythmically isolated, that means that only the rhythmical structure (no words) will be maintained. Students will be then instructed to carefully listen to the rhythmical isolated pattern of the speech first (experiment 1) and of the song after (experiment 2) and to recall it afterwards. They will be also asked to carefully evaluate every single sentence. Both rhythmical

abstractions will be segmented into smaller units.

The experimental group will undergo a 3-days recall training of the rhythmical pattern before interpreting the speech. Our assumption is that instilling rhythmical patterns in B group subjects' mind might enhance the SI performance. The experiments will be carried out in a SI laboratory setting; a short practice test on a related topic will be provided for warm-up. The same methodological procedure will be followed for experiment 2. All subjects will be run individually and after all the tasks will be completed, they will be given a short debriefing session. Both the original and the students' rendition will be recorded and transcribed by means of a computer-assisted transcription software, in order to process and analyze it.

Both rhythmical and linguistic performances will be evaluated by professionals at both levels (2 interpreters and 2 musicians) and scored on a 1 to 10 point scale. In particular, the evaluation criteria as for SI, will draw on the analysis at a syntactic, semantic and also at a pragmatic level (Pippa, Russo 2002). After data collection, a statistical analysis will be carried, in cooperation with an expert on statistics.

3.2 A tentative outline of expected results

What will the application of musical rhythm reveal about simultaneous interpreting? Ideally, four possible scenarios can be outlined:

- 1) no relevant differences in the performance of SI students between group A and group B;
- 2) differences between musically-trained students (subjects experiencing some forms of music during their life) and non-musically-trained students in terms of reliable helpfulness of music, or likelihood of music to improve SI performative skills.

Besides, some differences between group A and group B are worth mentioning:

- 3) group A may outperform group B;
- 4) by way of contrast, the high performance score may derive from group B proving to be the best performer: this would be a clear indication that music supports SI, which is highly desirable.

4. Conclusions

Several research works have investigated language and music, collecting objective data showing a strong relationship between the two disciplines (Besson 2001, Patel 2003). Starting from this assumption, and in order to gain insight into the skill acquisition process during SI training, our basic objective is to examine

the extent to which simultaneous interpretation can benefit from a valuable musical resource, namely rhythm, in terms of interpreting strategies and prosodic features. The main contribution deriving from this study would be a novel approach to SI education training. On the basis of a definition of rhythm derived from the literature on theory and methodology, a new paradigm could be outlined for future research, centered on the communicative and pragmatic function acquired during SI vocational training. In conclusion, rhythm could be used as an intermediate step, a sort of 'training wheels' (Déjean-Leféal 1997), before letting students perform simultaneous interpretation in a real conference setting.

5. References

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