

# 9

## SIGHT TRANSLATION

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### Introduction

**Sight translation (ST)** is the oral translation of a written text. When performing the task, the sight translator reads a written text, processes the meaning quickly, and orally translates the text while it is still being read. Sight translation involves visual input of a written message and oral output of its meaning, a hybrid form of language mediation that partially resembles both the translation and the interpretation processes. Herbert (1952, quoted in Agrifoglio, 2004) characterizes sight translation as a type of simultaneous interpreting. When used in an interpreting context where a speaker delivers the source message based on a written transcript, which the sight translator has access to while listening to the original speech, the act of sight translation becomes **sight interpreting** (Qin and He, 2009; Pöchhacker, 2004) or **sight interpretation** (Lambert, 2004). This chapter aims to provide an overview of sight translation, some issues and debates surrounding this unique communication skill, and its applications in the professional and academic settings.

### Definition of key terms

Broadly speaking, any rendition of a written message in one language into oral form in another language can be called sight translation. A case in point would be a bilingual tour guide explaining a brochure of a historic site written in English to tourists from a foreign country. In a conference setting where live speeches are delivered, interpreters may be given the speech texts in advance, allowing them to perform sight interpretation, or specifically **simultaneous interpreting with text (SIT)** or **consecutive interpreting with text (CIT)** (see Chapter 5 on simultaneous interpreting).

A sight translator needs to **read ahead** while orally translating the current segment of message. This is to ensure a smooth delivery of the translation without causing unnecessary interruption in the reception of the message for the audience. Reading ahead usually involves glancing over the ensuing sentence in order to determine whether certain linguistic elements need to be re-structured for the purpose of conforming to target norms. It is because of this constant shifting of the translator's visual contact with the source text and its presence in written form that sight translation is often considered a much more difficult task than other modes of interpretation (Mikkelsen et al., 1995).

During the process of sight translation, it might be helpful to **chunk** or **parse** the source text into smaller **meaning units** so as to lessen the burden of information processing, facilitate understanding, and speed up rendition into the target language. Chunking or parsing makes it easier for sight translators to deal with long and complex sentences, especially when the source and target languages differ dramatically in syntax and meaning formulation.

### **Historical perspectives and developments**

Sight translation has been extensively used for many pedagogical and professional purposes. It has played a role in many classrooms in the teaching of Latin (Luce, 2012) and many modern languages. The U.S. Department of Education implements programs to help state and district authorities test English language learners by using their native languages offered through ST in assessments of reading/language arts and mathematics (Stansfield, 2008). Traditionally, ST has been widely used in laying the foundation for acquiring skills in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting (Weber, 1990; Viaggio, 1995). Some translation and interpretation training programs even use ST for aptitude tests in the admissions process (Moser-Mercer, 1994). ST is also part of the testing components in the certification of court interpreters in Canada and the U.S.

Professionally, more and more translators now dictate their first draft of translations into a digital recorder using ST, and then convert the resulting sound file to an editable written format with the help of voice recognition software. As an indispensable mode of interpretation in any bilingual or multilingual communicative event, ST is frequently needed in a vast array of settings that require immediate access to information presented in a foreign language. ST is widely used in:

- international conferences and organizations, e.g. speeches, presentations, workshops, etc., presented in paper format or on screen, delivered in conjunction with simultaneous or consecutive interpreting (see Chapters 5 and 6 on simultaneous and consecutive interpreting, respectively);
- bilateral meetings, e.g. contract signing, business negotiations, etc.;
- escort interpreting, e.g. exhibitions, tours, site visits, etc.;
- hospitals, e.g. patient instructions, medical records, consent forms, procedural and safety guidelines, release instructions, etc.; and
- court: e.g. sentencing order, bail or probation conditions, indictments, peace bonds, etc.

In professional settings, ST is more likely to be viewed as a multi-purpose translation skill than a mode of interpreting (i.e. consecutive, simultaneous, whisper, relay, liaison, etc.) Many language service providers do not even mention ST as a service on their websites. During any interpreting assignment, however, certain written information in one form or another is usually made available to the interpreter, who might find it either helpful or distracting. While written scripts furnished in a conference may help ensure a more complete and accurate delivery of the interpretation (Lambert, 2004), they may also prove counter-productive to interpreters, who often find it cognitively burdensome to listen to the original speech and read the script at the same time (Agrifoglio, 2004).

Over the last few decades, multimedia presentations have become a major channel of disseminating information in any interpreting context. Speakers and presenters are supported by sophisticated PowerPoint presentations, densely-packed web pages, and social media sites full of highly descriptive emoticons and abbreviations. Interpreters in this media-rich world are thus required to demonstrate a multitude of capabilities characterized by instant comprehension, fast

reading skills, and a much shorter eye-to-voice span. Such requirements have implications for translator and interpreter training.

## Current issues

### *Sight translation in T&I curricula*

Many translation and interpretation programs around the world include ST as part of their curricula, with the emphasis ranging from a few classes at the beginning of a translation and/or interpretation course to a full course lasting for the entire semester (Ersozlu 2005; Zhan 2012). As ST involves oral output, incorporating this particular skill in interpreting courses certainly has its benefits in terms of developing quick reactions, thorough comprehension, and flexible oral skills among trainee interpreters. As noted above, some interpreters prefer not to have textual support when performing **simultaneous interpreting (SI)**; but such interference may not be as significant in **consecutive interpreting (CI)**, which involves taking notes while listening to the source speech and referring to those notes while rendering it into the target language. SI with text may be helpful, however, when the speaker is reading from a script at a high speed, which makes interpreting simultaneously more demanding and stressful. Textual support in this circumstance will certainly help interpreters produce a more complete rendition of a fast speech on the fly, as shown in Lambert (2004). Possessing the ability to perform SI with text will be a plus for interpreters in today's industry, which is often characterized by fast speakers in a tightly-packed conference schedule.

Teaching sight skills in a translation class is also beneficial, as ST makes students more aware of the importance of prioritizing meaning over words, an ability that often takes a long time to acquire among trainee translators. The chunking skills required for performing ST are especially useful in helping students untangle long sentences with embedded clauses. In fact, many translators now produce the first draft of their work using ST and voice recognition software in conjunction with a word processor – a more efficient workflow for doing longer translation projects with a tight deadline.

### *Sight translation in professional environments*

Whereas interpreters are usually provided with speeches in advance for a conference interpreting assignment, sight translators in courts and hospitals are often called upon to perform ST without any preparation at all. This may result in a hasty or simplified translation that can be risky in legal or medical settings (ALSINTL, 2012). For example, sometimes a written witness statement in a foreign language may contain words or expressions that an interpreter cannot understand immediately without consulting a dictionary (see Chapter 12 on court interpreting). Performing a sight translation on the spot without proper preparation generates unverifiable information that has legal implications. To avoid these issues, translation agencies usually recommend having all the required documents translated beforehand instead of relying on a hasty ST. This will ensure that the needed information presented in a foreign language is conveyed as accurately and completely as possible to its intended recipient (Legal Language Services, 2013).

The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) recommends that interpreters be allowed sufficient time to review the documents presented in court before ST is performed. The interpreter must possess a wide range of vocabulary and background knowledge of the information to be sight translated, demonstrate the ability to scan the document quickly and understand its main points, and produce an accurate interpretation of the document into

the target language (NAJIT, 2006). The New Jersey Judiciary is planning on implementing a regulation requiring that sufficient time be given to the court interpreter to assess a text message created on a mobile device before it can be faithfully and accurately sight translated (Mikkelsen, 2013, personal communication). The interpreter has to make sure a text message is clear and short enough to be sight translated in court. The National Council on Interpreting in Health Care (NCIHC) states that ST should be used in medical settings on a limited basis; the content to be sight translated must not be too long or complicated in order not to overburden the patient or the interpreter (see Chapter 15 on healthcare interpreting). NCIHC also recommends that medical staff be present when ST is performed so as to answer any questions that the patient might have, and that documents with legal concerns should be professionally translated and then read to the patient by the interpreter to avoid mistranslation of high register legal terminology (NCIHC, 2009). The International Medical Interpreters Association (IMIA), on the other hand, acknowledges the useful and convenient tool of ST in facilitating communication between the hospital and the patient. It recommends that interpreters should be appropriately trained and required to demonstrate basic translation skills in order to sight translate texts not intended for publication (IMIA, 2009). The IMIA Guide on Medical Translation further recommends that a process for handling urgent translation needs, including ST, be established, and that an interpreter may be hired to sight translate information provided by patient in a foreign language, as long as the process is properly monitored and documented.

## **Recommendations for practice**

### ***How research on sight translation informs translator and interpreter training***

Over the last two decades, many studies on ST have been published on a wide range of topics, including the cognitive constraints of ST, a quality comparison of ST and SI, ST's role in interpreter training, course design, and how ST relates to interpreting and written translation. Although ST is not as widely researched as written translation and consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, its indispensable role in translator and interpreter training has been recognized and thoroughly studied in a number of dissertations at masters and doctoral levels (Huang, 2010; Hsu, 2009; Wan, 2005).

The fact that ST is performed with textual support may make it seem easier than traditional consecutive or simultaneous interpreting, which relies purely on aural input. The presence of messages written down in black and white during ST may give a false sense of confidence in comparison to the cognitive load of listening and full attention experienced in consecutive or a simultaneous interpreting. Many studies, however, suggest that ST is a more difficult task than CI or SI, due to the constant presence of the source text in the hand of the sight translator. Some professional interpreters often opt for listening rather than relying on visual input at the same time during simultaneous interpreting, simply because the two combined tasks tend to create a burdensome cognitive load. Agrifoglio (2004) indicates that ST can be as cognitively demanding as CI and SI, with visual interference being seemingly stronger than the audio interference found in CI and SI. With the source text in hand, interpreters may focus too much on reading and processing individual words rather than having a full comprehension of its meaning, which is required for any interpreting assignment.

In Gile's (2009) Effort Model, SI involves listening (L), production (P), short-term memory (M), and coordination (C), while ST is a two-phase process consisting of reading (R) and production (P). In this theoretical construct, ST can be considered a skill involving less effort than SI. Agrifoglio (2004), however, presents the opposite view, echoing Mikkelsen *et al.* (1995) in

saying that the cognitive demand associated with ST is on a par with that of CI or SI. Agrifoglio argues that the main difficulty of ST lies in the physical presence of the source text in its entire process, which tends to be more distracting than the non-physical, aural input of CI or SI. The existence of the source text is also cited by Agrifoglio as one of the reasons why it can be very difficult to maintain a steady and fluent delivery of the output in an ST assignment. Her study shows that short-term memory during ST is still needed for storing the various sentence structures that the translator has produced; the more the syntax of the source text differs from that of the target text, the higher the load on the short-term memory. Agrifoglio thus suggests that proper marking of the key words and chunking of the meaning units should be made on the source text as the sight translator prepares for the delivery. Gile (2009) recommends using slashes to segment long and complex embedded structures into smaller chunks for easier processing.

Experiments carried out by Shreve *et al.* (2010 and 2011) show that the structure of the source text is disruptive to the mental process of the sight translator, and visual interference is created as a result of the presence of the source text during ST. These two constraints, in conjunction with the time pressure imposed on the sight translator, make the task cognitively more demanding than written translation. The expected end results of these constraints are errors, deficiencies, and disfluency in ST. In Shreve *et al.* (2010), a “shallow-scan hypothesis” is proposed to explain the side effects of the source text’s presence during ST, namely the translator’s inability to perform deep processing of the source text due to the need for the eyes to repeatedly scan its surface structure back and forth.

The pedagogical implications of the studies above highlight the importance of teaching the following skills in a sight translation class: (1) focusing on meaning, not words, (2) proper identification of key words and segmentation of meaning units in the preparation process, and (3) developing the ability to read ahead.

### ***How sight translation relates to written translation***

Some studies call for the integration of ST into the curriculum of written translation, particularly with more frequent use of ST in producing the first draft of a translation work. Experiments in Dragsted and Hansen (2009) reveal significant disparity in the number of words produced per minute by interpreters performing ST, translators doing ST, and translators doing written translation: 142, 74, and 17 respectively. The lower productivity in the written translation, unexpectedly, does not yield better translation quality than that produced by the other two groups of translators and interpreters.

Dragsted and Hansen (2009) compare the three translation outcomes by looking at keystroke logging, eye tracking, and quality rating results in the translation process. They observe that interpreters process the source text segments in a more sequential manner, dealing with one component after another, while translators tend to move their eyes back and forth on the computer screen searching for clues to help process the current segment of information they are working on. Pause analysis of the three groups shows that interpreters tend to demonstrate more confidence in performing ST, with more fluent delivery and fewer pauses. In contrast, written translators hesitate more frequently when working on written translation, even to the extent of pausing before typing every word. Though hesitating less often, those written translators performing ST still show a much higher frequency of pauses than interpreters. Gorszczynska (2010) supports the idea of integrating sight and written translation, citing the benefits of reducing time of translation, making the process more effective, speeding up the transfer of information, and lowering translation costs.

It is thus logical to recommend the use of ST and voice recognition software in the written translation process to obtain the first draft quickly for editing and polishing by the translator in the next phase of the work cycle. The studies above also suggest that translators with training in ST and voice recognition software may be more effective than those who have not received this training. ST skills combined with speech technology may help translators to focus more on meaning rather than words, and produce translation more effectively for the faster workflow required in today's market.

### ***How sight translation relates to interpreter training***

With its end product being an oral output, ST has long been associated with interpreter training as a tool to comprehend the source text quickly and to deal with information in chunks. In CI and SI curricula, ST is often taught in the first few classes to familiarize students with the basic skills needed in an interpreting setting (Ersozlu, 2005; Agrifoglio, 2004). Based on Gile's (2009) Effort Model for ST, which involves only reading and reproduction, Wan (2005) proposes an expanded model that includes reading, memory, coordination, and reproduction. The two additional components (memory and coordination) also play a crucial role in CI and SI. Wan's experiment confirms that consecutive students with certain level of ST training outperform those without ST training in the areas of information prioritizing, parsing of messages, accuracy of delivery, and dealing with long sentences. From a cognitive perspective, Wan's study shows that ST training significantly benefits consecutive students and helps them acquire the aforementioned skills.

From the standpoint of cognitive psychology, Jiménez Ivars (2008) considers ST as a mode of interpreting and suggests that it is a more difficult task to perform than written translation and other modes of interpretation. According to Jiménez Ivars, the challenges associated with ST include comprehension of the source text, lack of immediate access to translation equivalents, insufficient skills to read ahead, source text constraints, and misreading. In addition, the number of problem-solving strategies used during ST is almost twice the number adopted in written translation – a clear indication that ST is cognitively more demanding than written translation. These challenges should be addressed pedagogically to prepare students for performing ST more effectively.

Experiments carried out by Lambert (2004) show that ST and SI with Text (SIT) yield much higher grades of translation quality than traditional SI without text. The results indicate that having textual support in the interpretation process helps to ensure a more thorough and accurate translation. During ST and SIT, the interpreter has the opportunity to glance through the script quickly in advance, obtaining the required prior knowledge to provide a better interpreting service on site. It may therefore be advisable to teach ST and the related chunking skills in the beginning of an SI course. Practising SI with text is also helpful in mastering split attention, another crucial skill for performing simultaneous interpreting.

### ***Pedagogical innovation in sight translation training***

From a professional point of view, a successful ST performance depends on two factors: comprehension of the source text and the ability to produce clear and fluent delivery. This skill set entails a number of capabilities, including public speaking, reading ahead, analysis of the source text, parsing and chunking of information, sentence completion, paraphrasing skills, the ability to expand and condense, register manipulation, producing the target language version quickly, domain knowledge, and understanding cultural nuances (González *et al.*, 2012; Lee, 2012; Wan, 2005). Many of the studies described below are designed to help students of ST acquire these capabilities.

The authors of one of the first textbooks on English-Chinese ST, Qin and He (2009), emphasize synchronicity of speed and syntactic order between the source and the target texts when training for SI with text. Maintaining a parallel speed with the source speech ensures that the interpreter provides a thorough translation without major omissions. On the other hand, maintaining a synchronized syntactic order allows the interpreter to parse the source speech effectively into smaller meaning units that are easier to tackle, thus freeing the interpreter from having to restructure the source text and reducing cognitive constraints at the same time.

Considering ST as a special variant of simultaneous interpreting, Zhan (2012) emphasizes the importance of teaching sequential translation skills (i.e. translate along without major structural changes) as the core pedagogical activity in an ST class. His course design for ST centres on how the skill of translation in sequence is actually used in the professional market. The main components in Zhan's ST class include drills for sequential translation, basic ST exercises (chunking, addition, simplification, reverse translation, etc.), ST with source text, ST with target text (for training in following the speaker and reading the prepared translation), ST with source summary or Power-Point (PPT), and mock conferences. These exercises are designed to immerse students in a real-world setting of ST, with various activities to familiarize them with fundamental ST skills, such as simultaneous reading and translating, accuracy, proper phrasing, and structural transfer.

Lee (2012) compares professional and trainee interpreters in the areas of accuracy, target language expression, and delivery quality. She finds that student interpreters lag behind their professional counterparts in all of the three areas listed above. The skills required for ST and identified in Lee (2012) include reading comprehension, ability to differentiate key and ancillary ideas, avoiding source language interference, speed reading, quick response, avoiding redundant translation, developing chunking strategies, and condensing source information. Čeňková (2010) emphasizes the importance of chunking skills in ST. Her skill set for ST also includes fast retrieval of verbs, key words, and numbers in the source text, numbering various components when restructuring a long sentence, filtering out secondary information, speedy transfer of meaning, parsing long and complex sentences, fluent delivery, and avoiding repetition and unnecessary shift. In Ersozlu (2005), six major skills for ST at undergraduate level are identified, namely fast reading and comprehension, domain knowledge, detailed reading, dealing with unknown words, chunking skills, and meaning retention. These skills are essential for ensuring accuracy, coherence and fluency in ST. Ersozlu also recommends using those text types and documents that actually need to be sight translated in the real world, including hand-written or poorly-written documents, texts with charts and graphics, user manuals, journal papers, and texts with topics covering economy, trade, science and technology, medicine, environmental protection, computing, politics, patent, law, etc., all tied to carefully-designed exercises to enhance the students' ST skills.

Using PowerPoint software to present source text content, Song (2010) trains students to work under time pressure during ST. Each page of the PPT file has a pre-determined number of words displayed for a specific duration (in seconds) set by the trainer. Students are trained within these constraints to quickly identify meaning units in the source text, learn how to separate long sentences into small chunks, and gradually acquire the spontaneous, real-time information-processing skills needed for performing simultaneous interpreting. According to Song, timed ST exercises using PPT is an ideal, transitional tool to prepare students for SI training. It benefits students by training them in quick comprehension, developing working memory, strengthening split attention, and laying a solid foundation for developing the appropriate ear-voice span (EVS) required for SI.

Originally used in the theoretical study of translational features, corpus technology has just become the latest entrant in the toolbox for teaching ST. Chen (2012, 2013) has developed a

set of corpora for his Chinese–English ST class at the postgraduate level. The pedagogical tool has four components: Translation Learners’ Corpus (TLC), Corpus of English Speeches (CES), Corpus of Comment Tags (CCT), and Chinese–English Parallel Corpus of Speeches (CEPCS). TLC is a platform for ST students to learn from each other. CES provides access to idiomatic expressions in English speeches for students who are non-native speakers of English. CCT demonstrates those challenges and difficulties commonly found in students’ ST work. CEPCS helps students deal with translating cultural-specific terms from Chinese into English. Chen (2013) observes from CCT that the challenges commonly found in students’ ST assignments include phraseology, syntax, backtracking, omissions, and redundant translation. Corresponding exercises can be designed to assist trainee interpreters in dealing with the challenges found in CCT.

### **Future directions**

As written translation, sight translation and short consecutive interpretation involve different linguistic skills and are in great demand in the healthcare industry, the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care (NCIHC) recommends the use of different providers specifically trained for each of the three services. According to the NCIHC (2009), not all translators or interpreters are able to provide all the three services required in a hospital, and interpreters may often be expected to provide sight and/or written translation. It therefore suggests that translation and interpretation (T&i) training programs should include assessment of literacy levels in their admissions process, requiring the prospective students, for example, to write an essay in each of the two working languages. As it is recommended that the content to be sight translated for patients be short, informational, and semi-technical, NCIHC (2009) recommends that the training materials for sight translators in the area of healthcare should be limited to those of this nature, such as hospital signage, discharge instructions, and basic nutritional guidelines. Trainees in written translation, on the other hand, should be exposed to working on longer and more complicated texts, such as consent forms and advance directives.

In other areas of the profession, it is a common practice for a translator or an interpreter to be asked to provide comprehensive services in written translation, sight translation and interpretation. As discussed earlier, ST is found to be beneficial for both the practice of and training in translation and interpretation. An ideal curriculum design for T&i would thus emphasize ST in the training of both translators and interpreters. At the undergraduate level, for instance, a course in ST can be as long as a whole year to train students in the areas of comprehension, quick response, language transfer, identification of meaning units, parsing and chunking, accuracy, and phraseology. At the graduate level, emphasis can be placed on incorporating ST into both translation and interpreting courses so that students can benefit from the written sophistication and oral dexterity that the skill of ST relies upon.

With the currently available corpus technology, the teaching of ST can be technically enhanced by building genre-specific parallel and comparable corpora (see Zanettin, 2012) for providing convenient access to unfamiliar terms and expressions. Corpora also make a dynamic research tool for translation and interpreting students to enrich their learning experience and build up their background knowledge.

Looking ahead, sight translators should be trained and prepared for handling translation of messages on social media such as Facebook or Twitter. The widely used PowerPoint presentations in conferences, seminars, and exhibitions often contain instant messages quoted from social media sites and various websites. Information in these media tends to be out of context, abridged, personal, esoteric, or even hastily written, and can be presented in the forms of abbreviation, emoticons, or any random characters. Future sight translators should be equipped

with an even more dynamic skill set that encompasses not only trendy terminology and up-to-date views of the world, but also dexterity, domain knowledge, resourcefulness, concise and precise translation, and constant pursuit of professionalism.

### Further reading

Agrifoglio, M. 2004. Sight translation and interpreting: A comparative analysis of constraints and failures. *Interpreting*, 6 (1), pp. 43–67.

This experimental research describes sight translation by comparing it to simultaneous and consecutive interpreting, with a view to identifying particular constraints and problems of each mode.

Dragsted, B. and Hansen, I. G. 2009. Exploring translation and interpreting hybrids. The case of sight translation. *Meta: Journal des traducteurs / Meta: Translators' Journal*, 54 (3), pp. 588–604.

The authors report on a comparative study of written translation and sight translation, and suggest that working in the oral (sight) modality seems to have a lot to offer in terms of saving time and effort without compromising the output quality of written translation.

Ersozlu, E. 2005. Training of Interpreters. *Translation Journal*, 9 (4).

This paper aims to lay a groundwork for teaching sight translation at undergraduate level, based on concepts and strategies of skill training using step-by-step exercises.

Gorszczyńska, P. 2010. *The Potential of Sight Translation to Optimize Written Translation: the Example of the English-Polish Language Pair*. [e-book] pp. 1–12. <http://www.arts.kuleuven.be/cetra/papers/files/paula-gorszczyńska-the-potential-of-sight.pdf> (accessed 29 Sept 2014).

This article discusses the design of an experiment investigating whether sight translation can effectively reduce the completion time of the written translation process without compromising the quality of the TL text, thus streamlining and lowering the cost of the communication between text authors and the readers.

Lambert, S. 2004. Shared attention during sight translation, sight interpretation and simultaneous interpretation. *Meta: Journal des traducteurs / Meta: Translators' Journal*, 49 (2), pp. 294–306.

This study compares sight translation, sight interpretation and simultaneous interpretation, and concludes that visual exposure to the source text may help the student perform simultaneous interpretation.

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