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Stress and emotion in conference interpreting

Paweł Korpal

Introduction

Interpreting has long been perceived as a stressful activity, both by practitioners and interpreting studies scholars. Conference interpreting is not only cognitively taxing—an example of “extreme language use” (Obler 2012: 177)—but there are also various psychological challenges inherent in interpreting practice. Interpreters are exposed to a wide range of stress factors, including time pressure, challenging physical conditions, high-stakes assignments and heavy workload (Blumenthal et al. 2006: 478). Interpreters need to deal with read-out speeches, foreign accents, complex numbers, and many other factors that require extra processing capacity, collectively referred to as ‘problem triggers’ (Gile 2009: 188). In consecutive interpreting, practitioners may be at the centre of attention when providing their services for a large audience. Elsewhere, medical, legal and social services interpreters need to maintain composure when interpreting accounts of, for example, sexual assault survivors or terminally ill patients. Moreover, technological progress in the form of computer-assisted interpreting may make some interpreters feel uncertain about their future in the profession. Although the above might be perceived as overly hyperbolic, these factors unquestionably highlight how interpreting can be a stress-provoking, emotionally taxing activity.

Given the above, it is perhaps unsurprising that within interpreting studies there has been a growing interest in physiological and psychological stress. Linked to this, a number of researchers have pointed out that stress and other affective factors may impact upon interpreting (Bontempo & Napier 2011; Rosiers et al. 2011; Timarová & Ungoed-Thomas 2008), and the role of emotion has been emphasised in both translation and interpreting (Bontempo & Napier 2011; Hubscher-Davidson 2013, 2017; Rojo López 2017). The main aim of this chapter is to review the existing research on stress and emotion in conference interpreting. First, stress and emotion are defined and the relationship between these two concepts is explained. Studies on stress factors, stress coping strategies, and other psycho-affective aspects of conference interpreting are then discussed in order to provide a detailed insight into the interplay between interpreting and stress. Following this, a number of methodological challenges related to operationalising and measuring stress and emotion in interpreting are presented. Finally, given that research on emotional aspects of interpreting is still rather scarce, the chapter proposes...
further research avenues, along with a discussion on the importance of studying stress and emotion in conference interpreting.

**Defining stress and emotion**

Various approaches to stress have been discussed in psychology. Stress has been conceptualised as a reaction (Selye 1976) or, alternatively, as a transaction between the external world and the individual’s coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Likewise, a range of different theories of emotion have been developed over time. Emotions have been perceived, for example, as separate entities characterised by specific physiological manifestations (Ekman 1992) or as a result of the act of the conceptualisation of basic affect (Barrett 2017). What stress and emotion seem to have in common is that they involve both a physiological and a psychological component; that is, a physiological arousal is observed, which is accompanied by a subjective, psychological experience.

In his biological approach to stress, Selye (1976) defines stress as a reaction, based on the fight-or-flight response (Cannon 1932), to a given stressor, i.e. an event, or external stimuli, that motivates the organism to react. Selye (1974) also contributed to stress research by differentiating two types of stress: eustress and distress. While eustress is exciting and stimulates the organism to perform in stressful situations, distress is unpleasant, decreases performance, and can even be pathogenic, leading to mental and physical problems (Rice 2011: 26). For example, a person who is paralysed with fear on stage, and is not able to continue performing, experiences significant distress, which can be perceived as disagreeable. In general, the biological approach to stress focuses on the physiological response of the organism to a stressor, and the fact that the reaction may be either agreeable or harmful.

In the transactional model, on the other hand, stress has been defined as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman 1984: 19). Although a physiological reaction is an integral part of stress (Selye 1974, 1976), in the transactional model, the cognitive appraisal of an external stressor determines how a potentially stressful experience is perceived by an individual, and whether it is conceptualised as a threat or challenge to an organism. In Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) model, the transaction is between the potentially endangering environment and the coping resources of the organism. To give an example, public speaking—of which consecutive interpreting is but one instance—may be perceived as a danger to one person, while to another it might be a stimulating challenge. Lazarus and Folkman’s views are supported by more recent accounts (e.g. Cohen et al. 1995; Gunnar & Quevedo 2007) where “the stress process is thought of in terms of external challenges and perceptions of the challenges, coping resources and perceptions of coping resources, and the dynamic interplay of these over time” (Monroe 2008: 36).

As already pointed out, emotion has been conceptualised in the literature from different angles. Scherer (2009) identifies three main schools of thought: (1) basic emotion theories; (2) constructivist theories; and (3) appraisal theories. For instance, emotions have been described as discrete and physiologically distinct categories (Ekman 1992), or as constructed events (Barrett 2006). This chapter follows the views of Lisa Feldman Barrett and her theory of constructed emotion. In line with the theory, emotional experiences can be said to result from the act of conceptualisation (Barrett 2006). The process begins with the sensations from the body. For example, our heart may start to beat faster when we see someone we love. Our voice may tremble when we give an important talk in front of the room full of people. Then, our brain makes meaning from these basic affective responses (Barrett 2006: 21), conceptualising
and categorising sensations from the body and the outside world to construct an instance of an emotion (Barrett 2017: 30). Thus, voice tremor can be constructed as anxiety, and increased heart rate—as joy. Barrett summarises her theory of constructed emotion in the following way: “[i]n every waking moment, your brain uses past experience, organised as concepts, to guide your actions and give your sensations meaning. When the concepts involved are emotion concepts, your brain constructs instances of emotion” (2017: 31). What happens is that the core stimulation of either positive or negative valence is cognitively labelled by an individual in line with their prior knowledge and experience. Importantly for empirical research, the theory of constructed emotion claims that an emotional experience consists of at least two elements: core stimulation and the act of conceptualisation. This is reflected in the use of both physiological and self-report measures of emotion, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

The discussion of stress and emotion in one chapter poses the question of whether these two constructs are distinct concepts, or whether they overlap and originate in a similar way. Barrett (2017) has suggested that instances of stress are conceptualised using the same brain mechanisms responsible for constructing emotion. She notices that stress and emotion researchers have long been trying to explain how stress might influence emotion, and how emotion might lead to the experience of stress. In fact, what stress and emotion have in common is an internal sensation that may be triggered by an external factor. In Barrett’s theory of constructed emotion, both stress and emotion are similarly constructed in the brain and the difference lies in how these bodily sensations are processed and interpreted (Barrett 2017: 204; see also Rojo López & Korpals 2020). Thus, an interoceptive sensation (e.g. reflected in increased heart rate) can be categorised as either stressful or emotional (Barrett 2017). Such an understanding of the relationship between stress and emotion will be adopted in this chapter.

Stress and emotion in interpreting studies

This section provides a state-of-the-art literature review of research on stress and emotion, highlighting general trends and research avenues in the process. Although not exhaustive, the works cited in this section indicate what kind of research questions have been asked to date with regard to stress and emotion as experienced by professional interpreters and interpreting trainees (see also Korpals 2017 for an overview of research on stress in conference interpreting).

Stress and stress factors

One of the seminal studies on stress in conference interpreting was carried out by the Research Committee of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC 2002). One of the main objectives of the study was to identify stress factors in conference interpreting. The study looked into both the positive and negative aspects of stress experienced by interpreters, tested the impact of stress and working conditions on interpreters’ job performance, and formulated recommendations for minimising the negative effects of stress on the profession (AIIC 2002: 3). Both physiological (ambulatory blood pressure and salivary cortisol) and self-report measures (questionnaires) were adopted to provide a detailed insight into how stress manifests in interpreting. Some 607 questionnaires completed by AIIC members from various countries were analysed (AIIC 2002: 21). The study sample for the experimental part of the research, in which physiological data was collected, consisted of 48 interpreters from four countries: the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and Israel (AIIC 2002: 49).

Among the most salient stressors identified by the survey respondents were: fast speaker, textual complexity, subject of meeting, speaker reading from notes, difficult accent, and
booth discomfort (AIIC 2002: 116). Interestingly, these stress factors pertained not only to the cognitive aspects of interpreting—related to processing difficulties of the speech to be interpreted—but also to unsatisfactory working conditions, which emphasises the importance of the ergonomics of the interpreter’s profession. As for working environment, a number of problems were identified, including not enough fresh air and space, high room temperature, and insufficient lighting in interpreting booths. When explicitly asked about working conditions, respondents named malfunctioning or defective equipment as well as poor visibility of both the speaker and other visual aids as stress-inducing factors. Importantly, a moderate positive correlation was found between the condition of interpreting booths and stress experienced (AIIC 2002: 124). Moreover, between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of interpreters reported that their performance deteriorates as a result of stress (AIIC 2002: 34). Knowing that stress may compromise interpreting quality, this outcome is particularly alarming and the issue of the interpreters’ unsatisfactory working conditions should be taken into account both by event organisers and interpreters themselves.

The study also proposed a set of recommendations for improving the interpreting profession. In an open-ended question, the respondents were asked to list their own suggestions. Among the most frequent answers were: more briefing before sessions, better client education, and conference venues meeting relevant international standards (AIIC 2002: 43). As briefing sessions help interpreters to prepare for an assignment and understand the concepts discussed at an interpreted meeting, it may indeed be expected that such opportunities may translate into the interpreter’s self-confidence and potentially more accurate interpretations. Briefing can also help clients understand the practical aspects and intricacies of the interpreter’s profession.

In general, the research commissioned by AIIC was one of the first large-scale studies on stress experienced by conference interpreters. As many as 66 per cent of respondents reported a high or very high level of occupational stress (AIIC 2002: 34). The stressful nature of conference interpreting was confirmed in the analysis of heart rate and ambulatory blood pressure, showing that interpreters experience the highest level of stress while being on mic (AIIC 2002: 61). Although in general the interpreters expressed their satisfaction with most aspects of their job, they also pointed to stress-inducing factors which may compromise the quality of the services they offer. The study shows that stress, working conditions, interpreters’ job satisfaction and interpreting quality may all be interrelated (see also Pradas Macías & Zwischenberger, Chapter 19, in this volume).

Apart from AIIC’s comprehensive project, other empirical research has been conducted on stress in interpreting. Some studies aimed to identify ‘stress triggers’ in conference interpreting, i.e. conditions that may elevate stress levels among interpreters. In Moser-Mercer et al. ’s (1998) study, the authors showed that prolonged turns of simultaneous interpreting led to interpreter stress and had a negative impact on interpreting quality. Elsewhere, Korpal (2017) found that a high delivery rate of the speaker increased the level of stress among student and professional interpreters, which was manifested by elevated heart rate and higher scores on the state anxiety scale of the STAI questionnaire (the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, Spielberger 1983). It was also observed that a high delivery rate compromised the interpreting accuracy of complex items, such as numbers. Thus, the way the speaker delivers their speech may negatively affect both interpreters’ comfort and the quality of the final product. Finally, Kurz (2003) observed higher heart rate values for trainees than for professional interpreters, which may suggest that lack of experience may make interpreters more prone to stress, although, in contrast to these findings, Korpal (2017) did not observe such inter-group differences. Thus, more research is still needed to understand the relationship between stress and experience in interpreting (see also Moser-Mercer, Chapter 28, in this volume).
With the advent of new technologies in conference interpreting, more and more research has focused on the psychological constraints of remote interpreting (see also Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume) compared to on-site conference interpreting. The stress-inducing nature of video and telephone interpreting has been tested in a number of empirical studies to date. For example, Moser-Mercer (2005) showed that working under remote conditions is more stress-provoking than live interpreting and although in general interpreters accepted working remotely, the author observed that it was associated with higher stress levels. Elsewhere, Roziner and Shlesinger (2010) tested interpreters working for the European Parliament and noticed that although interpreters reported that remote interpreting was more stressful for them than live interpreting, this was not confirmed by physiological measures, such as heart rate or blood pressure. Moreover, no decline in the quality of remote interpreting was observed by independent assessors. In another study on stress in remote settings, Kurz (2002) observed that media interpreting induced more elevated stress levels than on-site interpreting among conference interpreters, which was manifested in both heart rate and skin conductance level. Various aspects of remote interpreting were also discussed in two studies conducted by the United Nations (2001). With regard to psychological effects, the first study showed that although interpretation users were in general satisfied with remote interpreting quality, interpreters themselves reported that “they were able to maintain their performance at an acceptable level, but only at a higher psychological and physiological cost” (United Nations 2001: 164). This was confirmed in the second study, where remote interpreting was referred to as physically demanding and more stressful than on-site interpreting. Feeling alienated due to working remotely was also mentioned as a potential factor that could lead to increased fatigue (United Nations 2001: 176).

Research into the psychological effects of remote interpreting suggests that working remotely may be an additional stress trigger for conference interpreters. At the same time, it should be pointed out that most studies on remote interpreting were conducted over a decade ago. Remote interpreting has been increasingly used in the last two decades (Braun 2015) which might have changed the way interpreters perceive working in this setting. For example, in their recent study, Seeber et al. (2019: 300) suggest that thanks to technological developments, remote interpreting “is no longer perceived as more stressful than in-situ interpreting or as being detrimental to the quality interpreters are able to provide”. This notwithstanding, given the relative dearth of research on the topic, further investigation into the interplay between remoteness in interpreting and the experience of stress is required.

**Anxiety**

Anxiety constitutes another psycho-affective factor that has garnered attention in interpreting research. Although stress and anxiety have often been used interchangeably in the interpreting literature, they are actually different psychological constructs. The experience of distress can be accompanied by emotions, such as anger, fear or anxiety (Lazarus & Folkman 1984: 33). In Barrett’s (2017) view, both stress and anxiety are similarly constructed in the brain and a psychological experience of either stress or anxiety results from how core affect is processed and interpreted. Another important distinction is the one between state anxiety and trait anxiety proposed by Spielberger et al. (1970). State anxiety is a transient, situation-based experience, while trait anxiety should be understood as a relatively stable personal characteristic, a tendency to become anxious in a variety of situations (Spielberger et al. 1970). These two concepts have also been used in a number of empirical studies on interpreters (e.g. Chiang 2010; Jiménez Ivars & Pinazo Calatayud 2001), discussed below in more detail.
In their study, Riccardi et al. (1998) used the ASQ—IPAT Anxiety Scale (Krug et al. 1976) to collect data on anxiety experienced in two groups of respondents: professional conference interpreters and interpreting trainees. The authors observed lower anxiety values among professional interpreters, when compared with interpreting novices. This was explained by the fact that professional interpreters may have more appropriate coping strategies when dealing with a potentially stressful situation. The notion of anxiety in interpreting was also studied by Chiang (2009), who showed that approximately one-third of student interpreters experience foreign language anxiety in class, which was reflected in their FLCAS scores (the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, Horwitz et al. 1986). In a later study, Chiang (2010) measured both foreign language anxiety and trait anxiety, the latter operationalised by the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger 1983), in a representative sample of 213 interpretation students. Although a positive correlation between foreign language anxiety and trait anxiety was present, trait anxiety turned out not to correlate with respondents’ learning outcomes. On the other hand, students’ foreign language anxiety negatively correlated with their semester grades and exam results. Elsewhere, in a study on 197 undergraduate students, Jiménez Ivars and Pinazo Calatayud (2001) showed that there was a relationship between low confidence in public speaking and high state anxiety scores. However, they found that consecutive interpreting performance was neither correlated with state anxiety nor with fear of public speaking, and thus research on the effect of anxiety on interpreting quality is still inconclusive.

Coping strategies

Professional and student interpreters use a range of coping strategies to deal with stress factors and to provide high-quality interpreting (see Riccardi, Chapter 27, in this volume). In terms of coping styles, research conducted thus far seems to suggest that task-oriented coping is predominant in interpreting. In their study, Kao and Craigie (2013) adopted the Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI; Amirkhan 1990) to measure which strategies student interpreters use when encountering stressful situations in the classroom. Out of the three main CSI subscales—i.e. problem-solving, seeking social support, and avoidance—problem solving is the most commonly used strategy among student interpreters. Students therefore seem to plan a course of action, set goals, and test alternative solutions. The results of this study may suggest that interpreting trainees perceive stress inherent in interpreting as controllable and amenable to being changed (Kao & Craigie 2013: 1040). This outcome is supported by a study by Korpals (2017), where the analysis of the CISS questionnaire scores (Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations, Endler & Parker 1990) revealed that task-oriented coping was the predominant coping style used both by professional interpreters and interpreting trainees. Further research could help answer the question of whether predominant coping strategies change with experience and whether similar strategies are used in various interpreting settings, such as conference, legal, or public service interpreting.

Emotional responses

As has been discussed, in line with the theory of constructed emotion, stress and emotion are not necessarily perceived as independent phenomena. In fact, an interoceptive sensation might be a manifestation of both stress (either positive or negative) and an emotional experience of any other kind (Barrett 2017). That is why, when measuring physiological arousal in the lab, it is advisable to triangulate it with other measures, such as self-reports. In a study by Korpals and
Jasielska (2019), skin conductance (a physiological measure) and the Polish adaptation of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al. 1988)—SUPIN-S30 (Brzozowski 2010; a self-report measure) were adopted to investigate whether professional conference interpreters converge emotionally with the speaker in simultaneous interpreting. To this end, 20 interpreters working in Poland interpreted two speeches from Polish (A language) into English (B language), one emotional and one neutral. More skin conductance responses were observed for the emotional speech, when compared with the neutral one. Moreover, higher SUPIN scores on the negative emotion scale were reported in response to the emotional speech. This may mean that interpreters mimic the speaker’s emotion or, at a more cognitive and interpersonal level, empathise with the speaker experiencing negative emotional states. In general, the results show that interpreters indeed express emotions in their interpretations, which could be linked to processes of emotional sharing, and that in general interpreters are affected by the speaker’s negative emotions.

The question of interpreters’ emotional responses has not only been researched in the context of spoken language interpreting, but also in sign language interpreting (see Turner, Grbić, Stone, Tester & de Wit, Chapter 38, in this volume). For example, Hetherington (2011) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with six sign language interpreters working in the United Kingdom. She found that sign language interpreters may react emotionally when working in distressing situations or sensitive settings (Hetherington 2011: 155). This has also been supported by findings from a study by Dean and Pollard (2001), who emphasise that sign language interpreters may be at risk of occupational burnout and stress-related illness. However, it should be noted that a lot of research on stress and emotion in sign language interpreting was undertaken in the context of community interpreting, and not conference interpreting.

On the one hand, interpreters working in sensitive settings may develop vicarious trauma or chronic stress symptoms. On the other, emotional competence (Albl-Mikasa 2014) and empathy (Kopczyński 1981) play a significant role in the interpreting task. Thus, further research is needed to ascertain whether emotional response has an enriching, neutral, or detrimental effect for interpreters, who could potentially but need not develop secondary trauma or experience chronic stress as a result of being exposed to negatively-valenced content on a daily basis. In general, research on conference interpreters’ emotional responses and their effect on job performance is still in its infancy, however, a growing interest in the psycho-affective aspects of interpreting, especially using physiological methods, has been observed in recent years.

Summary

To summarise this section, conference interpreting has long been theorised and observed as being a stressful and emotionally taxing activity. That claim is now supported by physiological and self-reported evidence from studies of both professional and student interpreters. Scholars have identified stress factors in conference interpreting and investigated interpreters’ predominant coping styles. Anxiety was discussed as an important factor in the interpreting classroom. It was also shown that both spoken language and sign language interpreters may emotionally react to some interpreted content. Although this chapter focuses on stress and emotion in conference interpreting, it should be noted that research on the psychological effects of stress and emotion has even more so been conducted in public service (or community) interpreting (see Tiselius, Chapter 4, in this volume), where the emotional burden may be even heavier. For example, community interpreters were found to experience emotional stress (Doherty et al. 2010; Roberts 2015) as well as be prone to exhaustion (Holmgren et al. 2003) and secondary...
traumatic stress (Mehus & Becher 2016), also as a result of being regularly exposed to affect-laden stimuli. Further research could aim at comparing stress factors and interpreters’ coping strategies in conference and community interpreting settings. Such a comparison could help identify the different psycho-affective challenges inherent in various interpreting modes, types, and settings.

Measuring stress and emotion: methods and challenges

This section presents a discussion of methods adopted in interpreting studies to test stress and emotion. As already mentioned, stress and emotion include both a physiological and psychological reaction to a given stimulus and that is why these theoretical constructs can be empirically tested in at least two ways: by measuring physiological arousal and the activity of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), based on the fight-or-flight response (Cannon 1932); and by adopting self-report measures to examine the subjective experience of stress, anxiety, or emotion intensity. Both these types of methods have been frequently used in interpreting studies. The range of physiological methods used includes: skin conductance (e.g. Korpal & Jasielska 2019; Kurz 2002, 2003), heart rate or heart rate variability (Chernigovskaya et al. 2019; Klonowicz 1994; Korpal 2017; Kurz 2002, 2003; Roziner & Shlesinger 2010), blood pressure (Klonowicz 1994; Korpal 2016; Roziner & Shlesinger 2010), concentration of salivary cortisol (Moser-Mercer et al. 1998; Moser-Mercer 2005), and immunoglobulin M (IgM) levels (Moser-Mercer 2005). To the best of the author’s knowledge, electromyography (EMG, recording electrical activity in muscle tissue) has not been employed yet to study emotion in conference interpreters.

At the other end of the methodological spectrum are measures based on self-reporting, i.e. questionnaires and other psychometric instruments. Depending on the phenomena being investigated, researchers have used measures such as: the ASQ—IPAT Anxiety Scale by Krug et al. (1976) (Riccardi et al. 1998); the STAI—State-Trait Anxiety Inventory by Spielberger et al. (1970) (Chiang 2010; Jiménez Ivars & Pinazo Calatayud 2001; Korpal 2017; Moser-Mercer 2005); the Interpretation Classroom Anxiety Scale by Chiang (2006) (Kao & Craigie 2013); the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale by Horwitz et al. (1986) (Chiang 2009, 2010); and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule by Watson et al. (1988) (Korpal & Jasielska 2019). Physiological and self-report measures were sometimes triangulated for the sake of construct validity and data reliability (e.g. Moser-Mercer 2005; Roziner & Shlesinger 2010; Korpal 2017). For an overview of psychophysiological stress research methods, see also Zeier (1997).

Research on stress and emotion in interpreting studies facilitates the understanding of what interpreters experience at work and how their bodies prepare to deal with the negative effects of the stressful environment. Looking for answers to these questions may indeed be a fascinating process; however, the methodological challenges related to the use of physiological and self-report measures should also be addressed. One of the main challenges is ecological validity, that is, how to capture the ‘natural’, real-life stress and emotion that conference interpreters actually experience in their daily work. Such measures can only be approximated in a lab setting as they can be impractical or disruptive during interpretation of real-life meetings. For example, interpreters in the lab are not only asked to interpret pre-recorded speeches but are also tested using equipment that may restrict their movement, or asked to fill in questionnaires unrelated to the interpreting task itself. Another challenging aspect of testing stress and emotion in the lab is that interpreters may be intimidated by efforts to measure their emotional responses to the content of interpreted speeches or unwilling to share their emotional states with the
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experimenter (see Korpal & Jankowiak 2018). What is more, arousal detected through physiological measures might reflect stress related to participating in the study and being assessed by the experimenter as much as it does stress related to interpreting. Such confounds can be resolved to some extent through triangulation with other research methods, as it is often done in other areas of research on interpreting.

When using physiological measures, researchers should always consider potential confounding variables. For example, skin conductance is believed to be a valid measure of physiological arousal (Mauss & Robinson 2009) that might index stress or an emotional experience. However, using this approach requires a level of methodological awareness to ensure reliability by ruling out alternative plausible explanations, e.g. the effect of caffeine intake on physiological arousal (Barry et al. 2005; see also Rojo López & Korpal 2020). Essentially, conducting research on the psycho-affective aspects of conference interpreting also requires expertise in other (neighbouring) fields such as affective science, stress research, differential psychology, and psychometrics.

In the case of self-report measures, social desirability bias presents a common challenge. As Fisher (1993: 303) rightly states: “the desire of respondents to avoid embarrassment and project a favourable image to others” can skew results. For example, when filling in the STAI X-1 questionnaire, which measures state anxiety, respondents might not be willing to reveal that they are anxious or nervous. In order to maintain a professional demeanour and not show their weaknesses, they might be more eager to agree with statements that affirm their self-confidence, calmness, or joy. Moreover, they might be uncomfortable answering questions they consider sensitive. Humans are believed to differ in terms of their emotional intelligence and thus some people may find it hard to categorise their emotional states or label them. As such, some participants may not be aware of which emotions they experience at a given point in time, as required in self-report measures such as the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger et al. 1970) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al. 1988). For a summary of methodological limitations of physiological and self-report measures used to study emotion, see Korpal and Jankowiak (2018).

Future directions and conclusion

As has been shown in the chapter thus far, research on stress and emotion has gained some ground in recent decades in interpreting studies. Previous studies show that speaker characteristics, such as accent (AIIC 2002) or high delivery rate (Korpal 2017), may be a source of stress for conference interpreters. Although still inconclusive, some studies suggest that remote interpreting is more stressful than on-site interpreting (e.g. Kurz 2002; Moser-Mercer 2005). Likewise, poor working conditions (such as discomfort in the booth; AIIC 2002) may also increase stress, which points to the importance of the ergonomics of the interpreter’s job and its impact on conference interpreters’ well-being. To counter the negative effects of stress, interpreters seem to use task-oriented coping as a predominant coping style (Kao & Craigie 2013; Korpal 2017). Research on emotion has shown that interpreters may converge emotionally with the speaker (Korpal & Jasielska 2019) and might be prone to fatigue and significant emotional distress (Hetherington 2011).

Despite all of these findings, however, there are still many research questions yet to be answered. What is the relationship between interpreters’ stress and performance? Is stress mostly a motivating or an impairing factor in interpreting? More longitudinal studies could provide an interesting insight into the effect of training on stress resistance. It also seems that the focus of research on stress in conference interpreting has, up to now at least, been...
mainly concerned with simultaneous, as opposed to consecutive interpreting (but see Johnson 2016). It could be propitious to see whether consecutive interpreting, in which interpreters are not hidden in interpreting booths and may at times perform in front of a live audience (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume), is in fact more stressful to both student and professional interpreters than simultaneous interpreting is.

Furthermore, computer-assisted interpreting (CAI) tools are growing in popularity and prevalence in the profession (see Fantinuoli, Chapter 36, in this volume). Preliminary research outcomes suggest that the search and term-management features of CAI tools may be useful for conference interpreters (e.g. Biagini 2016; Prandi 2018). However, what seems to have not been researched yet are the psychological effects of using state-of-the-art term-management software during interpreting. Although CAI tools may be a useful technological advancement, especially in simultaneous interpreting, using them also requires some technical skills, which in turn may elevate the level of interpreters’ stress. Given this, more research is needed to ascertain whether new interpreting technologies can lead to stress and anxiety, as has previously been indicated with media or remote interpreting (Kurz 2002; Moser-Mercer 2005; Roziner & Šlesinger 2010).

Finally, the outcomes of research on stress and emotion can also be applied in interpreter training. They can help conference interpreting trainers to identify the most salient stress triggers (e.g. accent—AIIC 2002; fast speakers—Korpal 2017) and devote more time to discussing potential coping strategies in class. Moreover, since previous research shows that conference interpreting may induce a significant level of stress, a course in public speaking and stress coping could be included in conference interpreting curricula to equip students with available resources which will enhance their self-esteem and efficacy in the classroom (Korpal 2017; see also Johnson, Chapter 40, in this volume). Instead of conceptualising stress as something that should be avoided, interpreter trainers could explain that a physiological reaction to a perceived threat or challenge is inevitable and that stress should be accepted as an integral part of interpreting. Instead, attention should be devoted to how to counter the negative effects of distress and how to take advantage of the positive aspects of eustress.

Apart from training, the existing research on stress and emotion in interpreting may be a starting point for the formulation of recommendations that might aid professional conference interpreters experiencing stress that exceeds their coping resources. Moreover, research outcomes could be made available to clients, institutions and authorities that use interpreting services on a regular basis, as well as to representatives of professional associations which aim to promote good practices among interpreters. This will make stakeholders aware of the challenges involved in conference interpreting. Thinking more broadly, study outcomes could be published not only in scientific journals but also in mainstream media, which may lead to greater awareness and appreciation of what interpreters do.

To summarise, the main objective of the chapter has been to present an overview of research on stress and emotion in conference interpreting, as well as to outline a number of methodological considerations. Hopefully, the chapter will stimulate further research on the relationship between stress/emotion and interpreting, not only within the conference interpreting paradigm, but also in public service and legal interpreting. As a final remark, when asked about their work, practising interpreters sometimes report that stress is an integral part of their job (AIIC 2002); something that they all had to accept when deciding on this career path. Research on stress and emotion may help them understand the psycho-affective challenges of interpreting and also empower them to develop their skills by providing them with resources and coping strategies that can improve their well-being and, in turn, enhance the quality of the services they offer to clients and interpretation users.
Further reading


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