Interpreting work buffers against aging? Reporting on the AIIC Lifespan Study

An examination of how age-related changes in language abilities and the cognitive abilities underlying them are experienced by professional multilinguals – namely, conference interpreters.

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Recent studies suggest that multilinguals are at a slight advantage when it comes to aging as the more active use of certain brain areas responsible for language processing seems to confer a degree of protection against the negative effects of normal aging seen in monolinguals (e.g., Bialystok, Craik, Green, & Gollan, 2010). Moreover, there is literature suggesting that individuals who are cognitively more active show less cognitive decline with advancing age (e.g., Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Yet there is some mention of changes in crucial abilities among interpreters (Keiser, 2005) in their 60s and later. The question the AIIC Research Committee has been exploring as part of its Lifespan Project is how age-related changes in language abilities and the cognitive abilities underlying them are experienced by professional multilinguals – namely, conference interpreters. This article reports on the first set of data acquired through interviews with ten conference interpreters from four countries (five female and five male) who are members of AIIC, either fully retired or nearing retirement. Each of the participants was interviewed by two interviewers – AIIC Research Committee members, Barbara Moser-Mercer (Convener), Miriam Shlesinger, Ingrid Kurz, Minhua Liu and an outside consultant, Loraine Obler of the CUNY Graduate Center.

METHODS

A set of questions, prepared by Obler deriving from her research on language in healthy aging, served as the interview guide. These questions were based on what has been identified as relevant to our project in the literature on language changes associated with healthy aging in monolinguals (e.g., Obler & Pekkala, 2008), because very little research has been carried out on language changes in elderly bilinguals (but see Goral, 2004). The most relevant aspects of language change identified in the literature relate to the ability to retrieve lexical items (particularly, but not only, proper names) and comprehension under less than ideal circumstances (e.g., noisy listening conditions, multi-speaker talk, complex syntax, reduced redundancy), which are challenging even for older individuals with normal hearing. Among the cognitive underpinnings that have been identified as contributing to these problems are: difficulties with attention and concentration, distractibility and reduction in working memory capacity, along with general cognitive slowing (e.g., Obler & Pekkala, 2008). These, thus, were the areas targeted in the questions.

The set of questions in the interview guide was sent to the interviewees in advance. The actual questions asked in each interview contained some follow-up questions relevant to topics raised by the interviewees themselves. Interviews lasted between two and six hours. In three instances, the
interview lasted slightly longer and was divided over two consecutive days. The interviews were audio-taped and in some cases segments were also video-taped. Transcriptions were made and edited against the original recordings, studied in a 2-day meeting and mined in a 3-day group meeting for demographic information and responses to the questions on the themes identified above, i.e., lexical retrieval, comprehension challenges, change in attention and concentration, distractibility and general cognitive slowing.

THE INTERVIEWEES

The interviewees ranged in age from 70 to 88 at the time of the interviews. They were either already retired or nearing retirement. Their A-languages included Catalan, Mandarin, English, French, German, Hebrew, Ladino, Russian, Spanish and Yiddish. Some had worked as freelance interpreters throughout their careers; some had been permanent staff interpreters; and some had done both in the course of their careers. Most of the interviewees had done far more simultaneous than consecutive interpreting, particularly towards the end of their careers, as the nature of the profession had changed. Some had done translation work throughout their careers, while working as interpreters. The majority had also taught in translation and interpreting programs. For some, teaching in their later years provided a second fulfilling career when they were taking on fewer interpreting jobs.

RESULTS

It is important to note that a number of interviewees across the different ages included in the study reported no age-related changes in their abilities to interpret. At most, they said they experienced what they called “normal” changes in memory for names. While remembering names and learning new ones was sometimes difficult, this appeared to be more of a daily-life problem than one that affected their work as interpreters. Whatever increased challenges these individuals noticed in their work, they attributed to external factors such as faster rates of delivery, the increasingly technical nature of conference presentations, and the growing tendency for speakers to read speeches rather than to speak extemporaneously. Quickly finding the precise term, however, was reported by a few interviewees to be increasingly difficult while interpreting. Relying on routines permitted them to get around such difficulties. Additional types of memory problems reported among the interviewees were rare.

Despite several mentions of increasing difficulty in finding the precise term, the primary difficulty reported by those interviewees who had noticed age-related changes was not lexical retrieval, as had been expected, but, rather, comprehension problems that might be related to hearing problems associated with advancing age. A number of interviewees implicitly recognised that “hearing” involves different levels of processing speech input, up to and including many aspects of comprehension. Some reported hearing loss that required hearing aids; others discussed difficulties in processing auditory input as either “hearing” or “comprehension” problems in a number of difficult conditions. Several interviewees with substantial-enough hearing loss to warrant hearing aids sometimes found wearing them counter-productive. Turning up the volume did not help once hearing loss had progressed to a more advanced stage, nor did attempts to adjust other aspects of sound quality, such as bass and treble. Wearing hearing aids while interpreting was uncomfortable and ultimately did not prove effective; this contributed to several participants’ decision to retire.

The hearing/comprehension difficulties associated with advancing age in many of the interviewees were exacerbated precisely by those aspects of speech that had been the most challenging previously. Frequently mentioned among them were technical terms, unfamiliar content, rapid delivery, scripted speech and unfamiliar accents in addition to challenging sound conditions such as speakers’ improper handling of microphones, bad acoustics and technical breakdowns; all these were mentioned as becoming even more distressing as one grew older.
A number of interviewees mentioned age-related problems with concentration that made interpreting increasingly stressful. Some responded to these challenges by doing more advance preparation, and/or by taking shorter turns (e.g., “20 instead of 30 minutes”). At the same time, some reported that the ability to quickly get into a focused mind-set remained strong throughout their careers, perhaps as the result of years of practice doing so in interpreting.

The interviewees cited a number of reasons for retiring, including hearing- and health-related issues, which were seen as compromising the quality of their work. One reported having been told that an “old voice” in the booth was not appealing and another indicated having been forced to retire simply because PCOs had stopped sending contract offers. Several had observed colleagues who, they adjudged, had continued taking on jobs too long, beyond when they were able to do high-quality work; by contrast, the interviewees in this study wanted to retire while they were still in top form. For some interviewees, age-exacerbated difficulties were the cause of physical symptoms and/or increased psychological stress. One interviewee concluded that interpreting had become so challenging that it was simply no longer fun.

CONCLUSION

In sum, there was substantial inter-individual variation in the age-related challenges reported by the ten interviewees with respect to their abilities to perform as interpreters in their 60s, 70s and 80s. Some noted no, or few, age-related changes that interfered with their interpreting work, consistent with the possibility that a career in professional interpreting buffers against age-related language changes. What many of them did mention was the changes in working conditions such as fast speeches and the increasingly technical nature of subject matter that seem to exacerbate the stress that accompanies interpreting work. While one cannot rule out that the perception of increased difficulty may have been related to aging, the interviewees themselves did not necessarily see it that way. Those who reported the most changes in their abilities had had health problems that directly or indirectly led them to observe that they were no longer meeting their own high standards.

REFERENCES


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