

Language processing embodied: Stress factors and coping strategies in community interpreting

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Bilingual processing and executive control are inherently present in the practice of interpreting. In recent decades, research has shown how the task of interpreting may also be affected by individual factors and the environment, which has been reflected, for example, in the discussion of the embodied cognition approach in the context of translation and interpreting (Muñoz Martín 2010). Stress and coping mechanisms have been identified in the literature as factors that may influence interpreters' well-being and interpreting quality. Previous research has shown how interpreters employ self-care strategies to mitigate stress in interpreting (Costa et al. 2020; Korpala and Mellinger 2022). Research with community interpreters has concentrated on the risk of occupational burnout (Watson 1987), exhaustion (Holmgren et al. 2003) or vicarious trauma (Ndongo-Keller 2015) as a result of the exposure to emotionally-charged conversations.

Here two studies are presented that complement existing scholarship on stress and coping in interpreting. First, an interview-based study involving twenty professional community interpreters investigated how interpreters recognize and conceptualize stress during and after interpreting. The study also identifies the types of stress factors, the impact of stress on interpreting performance, and coping strategies employed by interpreters. This research contributes to interpreting studies by pointing to various categories of stress factors in community interpreting and stress coping strategies that interpreters apply both to prepare themselves to a potentially taxing experience and to manage a stressful situation while interpreting.

Second, an experimental study examined the potential relationship between a specific variable identified in previous work, namely perceived spoken language accent, and the stress experienced by community interpreters. Participants – U.S.-based professional and student community interpreters – interpreted two pre-recorded job interviews consecutively, between an English-speaking recruiter and a Spanish-speaking interviewee. The Short Stress State Questionnaire (SSSQ; Helton 2004) was employed as a measure of self-reported stress to evaluate stress before the experiment and immediately after each of the two interpreting tasks, which was paired with a retrospective question to determine whether accent figured into the experienced stress. Preliminary results of the within-subject, counterbalanced experiment suggest that accented language within the country may not be as strong of an influence, as suggested in previous scholarship. Results from this study may shed new light on the role of regional accentual variation on interpreters' stress and quality. In general, research on stress and coping in community interpreting provides greater insight into interpreters' well-being, which can be applied in interpreter education and interpreting practice.

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