

PhD Thesis Abstract

A Study on Difficulties in Interpreting from English to Korean Arising from Features of World Englishes: With an Emphasis on Phonological Features of Indian English and Chinese English

Jiun Huh

Ewha Womans University, Korea

1. Background and Objectives

This study investigates difficulties in interpreting from World Englishes into Korean. The term ‘World Englishes’ includes different varieties of Englishes used around the world and emphasizes equality of all varieties. With globalization and growing international exchange, native speakers can no longer claim sole ownership to English, as English speaking population is growing rapidly among non-native speakers.

Consistent with such phenomena, English has become one of the most widely used languages in international conferences as non-native speakers increasingly use English to deliver their speeches. However, non-native English varieties display features distinct from those of native varieties, which may trigger interpreting problems. In particular, non-native English varieties may cause specific difficulties for interpreters when interpreting into Korean. The dearth of research on this topic prompted this study which focuses on analyzing the impact of non-native speech features on interpreting performance.

2. Research Questions and Methods

Against this backdrop, the main research questions for this study are set as

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follows: (1) explore the impact of World Englishes on interpreting performance at a general level; (2) examine whether there is a difference in perceived difficulties between interpreting native English and non-native English into Korean; and (3) identify phonological and syntactical features of non-native varieties and their impact on target texts.

Based on a small-scale interview of freelance interpreters and an extensive literature review, American English, Indian English and Chinese English were selected as varieties that best represent each of the three concentric circles of World Englishes introduced by Kachru(1985): the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle. A controlled experiment and a questionnaire-based survey were conducted for this study.

The controlled experiment was preceded by three rounds of pilot tests to ensure the validity and adequacy of its test method and tools.

The experiment was conducted on two different groups: experts and novices. Each group was assigned to different modes of interpreting tasks(simultaneous interpreting for experts and consecutive interpreting for novices), followed by a 'stimulated retrospective think-aloud' task, a procedure involving underlining segments of the transcribed source text perceived as unintelligible or ungrammatical by the participants and giving oral statements on the difficulties experienced during interpreting tasks.

The questionnaire-based survey was conducted on 28 professional freelance interpreters with a language combination of English and Korean.

3. Research Findings

The results of the controlled experiment and questionnaire-based survey indicated the following conclusions.

First, survey results confirmed that World Englishes have become dominant languages used in interpreting scenes and have impact on interpreting practice. Respondents said that they are increasingly facing non-native speakers from Greater China and Southeast Asian regions. Respondents also reported that they experienced more difficulties when interpreting from non-native Englishes in general and at phonological, syntactic, and lexical levels in particular. Furthermore, non-native Englishes were found to cause psychological stress to the majority of respondents. When faced with such challenges in practice, interpreters were found to employ off-line strategies such as arranging pre-

meetings with speakers and requesting presentation materials ahead of the conference, which are strategies not confined to non-native speech but ones particularly valuable when faced with unintelligible segments of non-native speaker's utterance. Online strategies included summarizing such as selection, deletion or generalization.

Despite difficulties experienced in interpreting practice, non-native Englishes are largely downplayed in interpreter training programs while most of the survey respondents shared the importance of including non-native Englishes in interpreter training courses.

Second, results from the controlled experiment revealed that non-native English speakers imposed more challenges than native speakers, which coincides with the findings of the survey. Interpreting challenges were measured by 'intelligibility' of source text speech, 'comprehensibility' of the source text message, and 'processing capacity requirement' in interpreting process. Specifically, experts and novices alike perceived the two non-native varieties – Indian English and Chinese English—as extremely unintelligible and incomprehensible while requiring huge processing capacity to process the two varieties. On the contrary, American English was found to be highly intelligible and comprehensible while requiring little processing capacity.

Third, phonological and syntactical features of Indian English and Chinese English were found to have profound impact on the difficulties perceived by participants and on target text qualities as well. Analysis on the relations between perceived triggers of interpreting problems in source text, features of non-native English varieties, and interpreting problems displayed in target texts revealed that suprasegmental and segmental features of Indian English and segmental and syntactical features of Chinese English were the main factors perceived as challenges by participants and served as error triggers in interpreting outputs. More specifically, suprasegmental features of Indian English such as word stress in different syllables than in native English, sentence stress in both function words and content words, monotonous intonation, lack of pauses, level vowel lengths, and segmental features such as extensive use of flap /r/, unaspirated consonants such as /t/ and /d/, retroflex consonants, and monophthongs in place of diphthongs were the main causes of interpreting problems. For Chinese English, segmental features such as monophthongs in place of diphthongs, insertion of schwa after consonants, consonant drops in consonant clusters, and syntactic features involving parts of speech, tense, verb, subject omissions, insertion of particle pauses, conjunctions, prepositions were

found to be the main problem triggers.

Survey results supported the outcome of the controlled experiment, with respondents pointing to suprasegmental and segmental features as elements causing profound challenges for Indian English, while rating segmental and syntactic features as the most challenging elements in Chinese English.

The aforementioned features, inevitably, affected interpreting outputs in the experiment. Segments of source text marked as interpreting problems perceived by participants displayed errors and shifts in meaning in the form of full omissions, partial omissions, and meaning errors. In fact, errors were not confined to the segments of the source text marked as perceived triggers but spilled over to ensuing ST segments as participants suffered from overload of processing capacity due to the initial problem triggers.

On the contrary, interpreting outputs of American English rendered a completely different result, with fidelity and accuracy of the interpreted rendition for both experts and novices significantly higher. It is thus important to note that phonological and syntactical features of non-native Englishes impose significant challenge to even proficient interpreters.

4. Conclusion

In this regard, a parallel approach can be proposed to address the challenges arising from non-native Englishes. First, it is imperative that major actors of international conferences, such as organizers, speakers, interpreters and the audience, all coordinate to create a conducive environment for interpreters so as to lessen their burden when interpreting from non-native Englishes. Second, interpreter training programs should help students expand their knowledge on features of World Englishes and use different English varieties as source text materials in interpreting classes, as the result of the survey suggests that knowledge on non-native speakers' L1 and more exposure to non-native accents help interpreters understand non-native speakers' speeches more easily.

The findings of this study which are based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis suggest that the implications of World Englishes for interpreting practice is profound and thus deserve further attention in interpreting studies.

Author's email address

jiun_h@naver.com

About the author

Jiun Huh, PhD, is an invited professor at the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation, Ewha Womans University, where she also earned both her MA and PhD degrees. Her major research interest is in interpreting process and World Englishes. She is a freelance conference interpreter, with Korean and English as her working language.