

Verbal Protocols in Translation Process Research

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INTRODUCTION

Translation Process Research (TPR) is a dynamic and evolving subfield within the broader field of translation studies. Rather than focusing solely on the analysis of the final translated product, TPR emphasizes the investigation of the underlying processes and cognitive mechanisms that translators engage with during their work. By exploring the intricate steps, strategies, and decisions that translators make, TPR aims to uncover the mental, behavioural, and technical elements of translation. This research offers a deeper understanding of how translations are produced, providing essential insights into both the cognitive aspects of translation—such as how translators process and transfer meaning—and the practical strategies they employ to overcome linguistic and cultural challenges.

Through TPR, researchers not only enhance theoretical frameworks of translation studies but also contribute to practical fields. These insights are particularly valuable for translator training programs, where understanding the nuances of the translation process can lead to more effective teaching methods. Additionally, TPR informs the development of advanced translation technologies, such as machine translation and computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, by highlighting the cognitive challenges faced by human translators and the strategies they use to manage them.

Data Collection in Translation Process Research

In TPR, data collection is critical because it allows researchers to capture a detailed and comprehensive view of the translation process. Unlike other research areas where the final product is the main focus, TPR examines the "in-progress" aspects of translation, such as the cognitive strategies used to make decisions, the behavioural patterns that emerge during the task, and the technical tools utilized by translators. To achieve a well-rounded understanding, researchers involved in process studies have extensively utilized Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs), a framework initially developed by Ericsson and Simon, alongside other verbal methods such as Integrated Problem and Decision Reporting (IPDR) to gather data from translators. These methods allow researchers to capture and analyse the cognitive processes and decision-making strategies employed by translators during task execution. TAPs involve participants verbalizing their thoughts while working, providing valuable insights into their mental operations. Similarly, IPDR helps in understanding the translator's problem-solving approaches and decision-making processes by recording and analyzing their verbal reports in a structured manner. Together, these verbal methods offer a comprehensive approach to studying translation processes and the underlying cognitive mechanisms.

Verbal Protocols in Translation Process Research

Verbal protocols serve as valuable data sources that capture the verbalized thoughts of individuals while they are engaged in a task. In the context of translation studies, verbal protocols offer insight into the mental processes and decision-making strategies employed by translators. For instance, Königs (1991) identifies several actions that are often verbalized during the translation process, including macro-planning (planning the structure of the translation), identification (understanding the meaning of the source text), problem-solving (resolving translation issues), and the use of resources such as dictionaries.

When working on a task, subjects typically think aloud in one of two ways: either continuously as thoughts occur (concurrent verbalization), or at predetermined intervals set by the researcher (retrospective verbalization). In some cases, researchers may ask subjects to verbalize their thoughts after completing the task, reflecting on the cognitive processes involved. These verbalizations are usually recorded verbatim, often using a tape recorder, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

It is important to note that verbal protocols differ from introspection. While introspection involves subjects actively focusing on and analyzing their cognitive processes, verbal protocols do not require participants to specifically concentrate on their mental activities. Rather, the aim is for subjects to express their thoughts as they naturally arise, without any external guidance or training in self-observation of their cognitive processes. The data collected through verbal protocols are then used in conjunction with theoretical frameworks to generate hypotheses and draw conclusions about the cognitive mechanisms behind translation tasks.

Researchers leverage these verbalizations to gain a deeper understanding of the translator's thought processes, strategies, and challenges. Verbal protocols help reveal how a translator approaches different aspects of translation,

from initial reading and analysis to problem-solving and final revision, providing valuable insights into both the conscious and subconscious decision-making involved in translation.

What Verbal Protocols Can Reveal About Thinking

Verbal protocols are a powerful tool in cognitive research because they offer a direct insight into the mental process individuals engage in while performing tasks. When participants verbalize their thoughts, they are essentially sharing what is active in their conscious awareness, or in working memory. This means that verbal protocol analysis captures those thoughts that are readily available to the individual and can be translated into language. Since individuals are typically not trained to focus on their cognitive processes in the same way they would during introspection, verbal protocols represent a natural and unfiltered expression of their thinking at the moment.

One of the most significant advantages of verbal protocol data is that it provides rich information about the contents of working memory during task execution. Working memory is a cognitive system responsible for temporarily storing and manipulating information required for performing mental tasks. It serves as the mental workspace where information is actively processed as individuals think, make decisions, or solve problems. Verbal protocols offer a snapshot of this mental workspace, providing researchers with a record of the thoughts that are consciously available and actively being used.

For example, in studies of reading comprehension, verbal protocols allow researchers to capture the inferences that readers make as they process a text. As individuals read, they often generate inferences—interpretations or conclusions that go beyond the words on the page—based on their prior knowledge and the information presented in the text. These inferences are stored temporarily in working memory, and verbal protocols help to bring them to the surface, offering a detailed look at how individuals construct meaning from text and connect it to what they already know.

In translation studies, verbal protocols can reveal how translators mentally process the source text, generate translations, resolve ambiguities, or consult external resources like dictionaries. By verbalizing their thought processes, translators offer a direct view into how their working memory helps them navigate the translation task.

Another compelling aspect of verbal protocols is their ability to provide sequential data, which reveals how thoughts evolve over time as a task progresses. This is important because cognitive processes are dynamic, meaning that the way individuals think at the start of a task may differ from how they think as they move through it.

In tasks like reading comprehension or problem-solving, verbal protocols show how people's mental representations of the text or problem change as they progress. For example, in reading, initial understanding may be based on surface-level comprehension, but over time, as more information is processed, readers may revise their understanding, make deeper connections, or change their interpretation of certain details. These shifts in mental representation can be tracked through verbal protocols, providing insight into the cognitive steps individuals take while working through a task.

In problem-solving studies, verbal protocols can track the sequence of decisions and strategies that individuals use to approach and solve complex tasks. For instance, when solving a puzzle or tackling a difficult problem, the researcher can observe how the subject plans their steps, revises their strategy based on progress, and considers different potential solutions. This sequential nature of verbal protocol data helps researchers map out the process of problem-solving, offering insights into the strategies and mental shifts that occur along the way.

Limitations of Verbal Protocol Data

Verbal protocol data is a widely utilized method in cognitive and behavioural studies, providing valuable insight into a participant's thought processes as they perform a task. However, like any research technique, verbal protocols come with inherent limitations that need to be considered when designing and interpreting studies.

- **Conscious Awareness vs. Automatic Processes**

A significant limitation of verbal protocols is that participants can only verbalize thoughts and processes they are consciously aware of. This means that automatic, subconscious cognitive processes are typically not included in the verbal reports. For instance, in tasks like translation, a participant may rely on learned strategies without actively thinking about them, and these automatic processes would not be verbalized. Therefore, verbal protocols are unable to capture these subconscious actions, which are essential for understanding how certain tasks are completed. To overcome this limitation, researchers need to combine verbal protocols with other techniques such as neuroimaging or physiological monitoring to access automatic and unconscious processes.

- **Changes in Cognitive Processes Due to the Think-Aloud Task**

The think-aloud procedure, where participants are asked to verbalize their thoughts as they work, has been debated regarding its impact on cognitive processing. While K. Anders Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon (1993) suggested that verbalizing thoughts does not typically affect cognitive functions, many researchers believe it

does. The act of verbalizing may alter the way participants approach tasks, possibly encouraging them to focus on strategies or information they wouldn't normally consciously consider. This could lead to overestimations of cognitive abilities or strategies. Alternatively, the demands of verbalizing thoughts can also disrupt normal cognitive processes, particularly for tasks that require deep focus or multitasking, thus distorting the true cognitive effort involved.

It may be noted that verbalizing thoughts may slow down task performance, especially for activities that involve fast, automatic cognitive processes. In translation, for example, a translator might experience a reduction in efficiency when asked to articulate every thought during the process, which could lead to an incomplete or skewed view of their natural cognitive abilities.

- **Social Influences and Self-Presentation**

Verbal protocols can also be influenced by social factors, such as a participant's desire to appear intelligent or capable. Participants might alter their verbalizations to present themselves in a favourable light, which can lead to an inflated account of their cognitive abilities. Conversely, more introverted participants may understate their cognitive processes due to discomfort or self-consciousness. These social dynamics can distort the data, making it difficult to discern the participant's true cognitive processes.

Additionally, the researcher-participant relationship can influence verbalizations. If participants believe they need to sound logical or clear for the researcher, they may provide overly simplified or structured responses, which might not reflect their natural cognitive strategies. These social pressures and self-presentation concerns should be considered when interpreting verbal protocol data.

- **Partial View of Cognitive Processes**

Verbal protocols offer a limited view of cognitive processes since they only capture what participants are consciously aware of. This means that verbal reports may omit crucial cognitive activities that occur unconsciously. For example, a translator may use cognitive strategies such as pattern recognition or chunking without being aware of it, and these strategies would not be verbalized. Moreover, nonverbal knowledge, like visual imagery or emotional responses, is often not captured in verbal protocols. Consequently, verbal protocols fail to provide a complete representation of all the cognitive processes involved in a task. To get a fuller understanding, researchers should use additional methods to gather data on both conscious and unconscious cognitive activities.

- **Time and Effort-Intensive**

Verbal protocol research is labour-intensive. The process of collecting, transcribing, and analyzing verbal data can be extremely time-consuming compared to other research methods. Transcribing verbal reports, coding the data, and identifying patterns requires significant effort and time, particularly for complex tasks. While this makes verbal protocol research demanding, the insights it provides into cognitive processes often justify the investment. Researchers need to be aware of these demands and plan accordingly when choosing to use this method.

- **The Need for Triangulation**

Since verbal protocols provide an incomplete and potentially biased view of cognitive processes, researchers should not rely solely on this method. Instead, **triangulation**—the use of multiple research methods to investigate the same hypothesis—should be employed. By combining verbal protocols with other methods, such as eye tracking, neuroimaging, or behavioural observations, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how cognitive processes work. Triangulation helps mitigate the biases of any single method and allows for a richer, more reliable analysis of cognitive performance.

Other Methods Used in Translation Process Research

In addition to verbal report methods like think-aloud, retrospection, dialogue protocols, and Integrated Problem and Decision Reporting (IPDR), several other techniques are employed in Translation Process Research (TPR) to gather comprehensive data. These methods are crucial in providing a more complete understanding of the cognitive, behavioural, and technical dimensions of translation, especially since verbal reports only capture what is actively being processed in working memory.

Think-aloud is the earliest method used in process research, as highlighted by Jääskeläinen (2002) and Göpferich (2009). It involves the translator verbalizing their thoughts as they work through a translation task, providing insight into cognitive processes. However, both think-aloud and retrospection (where participants recount their thoughts after completing the task) are limited in that they only capture information actively processed in working memory at the time of translation or shortly after. These methods do not provide access to unconscious processes or those not currently in working memory, which limits their scope.

Given these limitations, verbal report methods are often used in conjunction with other techniques to enhance data collection:

- **Questionnaires and Interviews**

These tools are used to gain additional insights from translators about their strategies, challenges, and experiences during the translation process. Questionnaires can gather general information about the translator's approach or work habits, while interviews can delve into more detailed reflections on the task at hand.

- **Key Logging**

Key logging tracks the actions of the translator by recording the keystrokes or mouse clicks made during the translation process. This method provides a detailed, objective view of the translator's activities, such as the time spent on specific segments, pauses, and the use of translation tools.

- **Translation Journals or Diaries**

Translators may be asked to keep a journal or diary, documenting their thoughts, feelings, and decisions during the translation process. This method captures reflections on the task, helping researchers understand the strategies, challenges, and shifts in cognition throughout the process.

By combining these various methods, researchers can access a wider range of data and gain a more holistic understanding of the translation process. For example, while think-aloud provides real-time verbalizations of cognitive processes, key logging offers objective data on the speed and sequence of actions, and journals can capture the translator's emotional and cognitive responses to challenges. Together, these methods help researchers triangulate data, providing a richer, more accurate depiction of how translators work.

In summary, verbal report methods such as think-aloud and retrospection are vital tools in TPR, but their limitations in capturing unconscious or non-verbalized processes mean they are often supplemented with additional methods like questionnaires, interviews, key logging, and translation journals. These combined methods ensure a more complete understanding of the complex cognitive, behavioural, and technical aspects of translation.

Optimizing the Advantages and Minimizing the Limitations of Verbal Protocols

To improve the quality and reliability of verbal protocol data, several strategies can be employed to reduce the impact of its limitations and enhance its validity. These suggestions focus on maximizing the authenticity and comprehensiveness of the data collected while minimizing the potential biases or distortions that might arise during the think-aloud process. Below are key recommendations for optimizing verbal protocol data collection:

- **Collect Verbal Protocol Data During Task Execution**

To ensure the data reflects cognitive processes under natural, task-related conditions, verbal protocols should be collected while the subject is actively engaged in the task. This real-time data collection captures the immediate flow of thought and decision-making processes, providing the most authentic insight into working memory during task performance. Delaying verbalization or collecting data after the task may risk losing crucial cognitive elements that were active only during the task itself.

- **Encourage Participants to Verbalize All Thoughts**

It is crucial that participants verbalize every thought that occurs to them during the task, regardless of its relevance or perceived importance. Limiting the verbalization to only certain thoughts or types of information may restrict the richness of the data and miss key cognitive processes. By asking participants to vocalize all thoughts, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the full spectrum of cognitive activities occurring during task execution. However, researchers should be careful not to direct the participants' thoughts or processing. If the intention is to study specific strategies or thought patterns (e.g., strategic planning or problem-solving), the researcher may ask for particular types of information. Otherwise, the goal is to capture the natural, unfiltered flow of thoughts.

- **Prioritize Task Performance Over Verbalization**

While verbalizing thoughts is central to verbal protocol research, it should not be the primary focus of the task. The task performance itself is the main concern, and verbalizing thoughts should be secondary. Since thinking aloud is not a natural behaviour, it may disrupt the normal cognitive flow, leading to a potential slowdown or altered task performance. Researchers should remind participants to verbalize, when necessary, but they should avoid disrupting the task to the point where it interferes with the quality of the data or task performance.

- **Minimize Conversational Aspects During the Think-Aloud Task**

To reduce the influence of conversational dynamics on the verbalization process, researchers should remain as unobtrusive as possible during the think-aloud task. This includes avoiding eye contact or any form of active

engagement that could lead the participant to modify their verbalizations to fit social expectations. The goal is to make the verbalization process feel as natural and spontaneous as possible, so the participant's verbalizations are more likely to reflect genuine thought processes rather than influenced by the researcher's presence or reactions.

- **Use Pilot and Warm-Up Tasks**

To help participants become more comfortable with the think-aloud process, researchers can incorporate pilot or warm-up tasks before the main task begins. These preparatory exercises allow participants to practice verbalizing their thoughts in a more relaxed and natural manner, which can reduce the initial discomfort of thinking aloud. By gradually acclimating participants to the think-aloud procedure, researchers can improve the accuracy and fluidity of the verbal protocols during the actual data collection.

CONCLUSION

Verbal protocols are a valuable method for exploring cognitive processes, but they come with several limitations. These include their inability to capture automatic cognitive processes that occur outside of conscious awareness, the potential impact of the think-aloud procedure on the natural flow of cognition, and the influence of social dynamics, such as the desire to present oneself in a certain way. Furthermore, verbal protocols offer only a partial view of the cognitive processes involved, as they primarily focus on what is consciously verbalized during the task. Additionally, collecting and analyzing verbal protocol data can be time-consuming and labour-intensive. To address these limitations, researchers combine verbal protocols with other methods in a process known as triangulation. By integrating multiple data collection techniques, such as key logging, eye tracking, or interviews, researchers can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the cognitive processes involved in task performance. While verbal protocols alone may not provide a complete picture, when used in conjunction with other methods, they offer detailed insights that enhance our understanding of the cognitive mechanisms at play, making them a valuable tool in research.

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