

Do interpreters mitigate offence? Emotional responses to gender-targeted face-threatening acts in political speeches

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The study investigates emotional reception of politically charged face-threatening acts (FTAs) directed at women and feminist movements in original and interpreted speech. FTAs play a strategic role in political discourse by provoking strong emotional reactions and shaping public attitudes. In simultaneous interpreting, this process becomes more complex, as interpreters must render the message in real time under heavy cognitive load while making rapid linguistic decisions (Gile 2009: 167-168). Research suggests that in such conditions, professional norms may be overridden by natural linguistic strategies, leading to pragmatic shifts such as omission, downtoning or strengthening of the FTAs (Magnifico & Defrancq 2016: 31, 34-36). FTAs themselves appear to trigger interpreter interventions, for example pragmatic shifts, which have been described as face-saving strategies employed when the speaker's, hearer's or interpreter's face is perceived to be at risk (Lenglet 2016: 247, 254). However, these shifts can also alter the pragmatic force and emotional impact of a message, challenging the assumption that interpreters simply transfer meaning (Dobkiewicz 2023: 171).

The study addresses the following research questions: (1) what pragmatic shifts occur during interpreting, and how they affect emotional reception, and (2) whether politically charged FTAs directed at women are perceived differently in the original and in their respective interpretations. In order to answer the research questions, an experimental study will be combined with a questionnaire-based reception study.

In the first stage, two political speech excerpts (one in Polish, one in English) containing clear FTAs directed at women or feminist movements will be selected. Ten professional interpreters will each interpret both excerpts, producing one interpretation from English into Polish and one from Polish into English. The interpreted texts will be compared with the source speeches to identify pragmatic shifts such as omission, mitigation or intensification, known to affect the ideological load of discourse (Dobkiewicz et al. 2023).

In the second stage, an online reception study will be conducted with approximately 20 native speakers of Polish and 20 native speakers English. Each participant will listen to two recordings in their native language: one original and one interpreted version randomly selected from the dataset. After each recording, participants will complete a questionnaire measuring perceived offensiveness, emotional intensity, aggression, discomfort, and hostility toward women, using a five-point scale.

Previous studies indicate that impoliteness tends to be mitigated in interpreting, thus reducing the ideological load of the original message (Bartłomiejczyk 2016; Dobkiewicz et al. 2023). Moreover, Hatim and Mason (1997, as cited in Mapson 2019: 42) suggest that shifts such as omissions, although often unavoidable, influence the audience's perceptions. Thus, it is expected that the interpreted versions will be perceived as less emotionally intense and offensive than the source speeches, reflecting the impact of pragmatic shifts.

The findings will contribute to discussions on interpreter-mediated communication by providing empirical evidence that interpreters may function as partial mediators of emotionally charged political discourse rather than neutral transmitters of meaning. The study also has implications for debates on interpreter responsibility, visibility, and the ethical challenges of rendering offensive or politically sensitive language.

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