

FROM THE BOOTH TO THE CLOUD – DIDACTIC OBSERVATIONS ON SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING

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Abstract: *The present study includes observations on on-site (OSI) and remote (RSI) simultaneous interpreting approached from two perspectives, that of an interpreter and that of a professor. Having taught this audiovisual translation mode for two decades while periodically doing simultaneous interpreting for equally long, I have noticed the added challenges following the 2020 COVID pandemic which have led to an imbalanced adaptation: as a simultaneous interpreter, I had to learn rapidly from each obstacle faced when thrown into Remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI), while my teaching approach was informed by my experience. Given that technological advancements take the job market by storm, training in remote simultaneous interpreting need to keep up by focusing on raising awareness of the differences which increase the difficulty of remote oral transfer.*

Key words: *de-learning, on-site simultaneous interpreting (OSI), remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI), rite of passage, training*

1. Introduction

Simultaneous interpreting has evolved from contextual whispering to overcome the delay in transferring oral messages which consecutive interpreting involves, constantly fueled by the core objective to convey the source message with accuracy. Technological advances in the 1920s and 1930s offered Edward Filene and Alan Gordon Finlay the means to develop telephonic equipment and facilitate ‘telephonic interpretation’. The contribution of Thomas Watson Sr., the founder of IBM, brought about the IBM Hushaphone Filene-Findlay System, fulfilling the need to spread information orally in real time. Two decades later, with the incorporation of fully sound-proof booths at the United Nations in New York, simultaneous interpreting gained ground around the world and made history during the Nurnberg trials (Gaiba 1998), largely deemed the official birthday of this AVT mode.

2. Definitions

Remote Simultaneous Interpreting has been around since the early 80’s, mostly used in medical settings, considered the “greatest change”, as well as a “technological turn” (Fantinuoli 2018) in interpreting studies and practice. The objective of this study is to raise awareness of the responsibility of trainers in teaching it, to advocate that the immense popularity remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) has gained since the COVID pandemic in 2020 calls for closer attention to the differences between on-site simultaneous interpreting (OSI) and remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI). The necessity to provide the interpreting service increased, while the means to do it had to be adjusted on the go, faster than expected. Several definitions of the remotely provided interpreting service have been given, taking into account the presence of the key players, the access of the interpreters to all the channels either from location or remotely, or the prevalence of one channel over another, resulting in sometimes incomplete definitions, such as “a situation in which interpreters are no longer present in the meeting room, but work from a screen using earphones, without direct view of the meeting room or the speaker” (European Parliament Interpretation Directorate, 2001:12). Following 2020, the video

component has gained importance, leading to further subcategories based on the balance of audiovisual input:

2.1 Distance interpreting Information and communications technology (ICT)-enabled interpreting of a distant speaker at a given event.

2.1.1 Teleconference Interpreting ICT-enabled distance interpreting of a remote speaker, where the interpreter has a direct view of some or all the other participants at a given event.

2.1.1.1 Videoconference Interpreting ICT-enabled interpreting of a distant speaker, where the interpreter has a video-mediated view of that speaker and a direct view of some or all the other participants at a given event.

2.1.1.2 Audioconference Interpreting ICT-enabled interpreting of a distant speaker, where the interpreter has a direct view of some or all the other participants at a given event but no view of that speaker.

2.1.2 Remote Interpreting ICT-enabled distance interpreting of a remote speaker, where the interpreter has no direct view of the participants at a given event.

2.1.2.1 Video Remote Interpreting ICT-enabled interpreting of a distant speaker, where the interpreter has a video-mediated view of that speaker but no direct view of the participants at a given event.

2.1.2.1.1 Multiscreen Video Remote Interpreting ICT-enabled interpreting of a distant speaker, where the interpreter has a video-mediated view both of that speaker and some or all of the other participants at a given event

2.1.2.1.2 Single-Screen Video Remote Interpreting ICT-enabled interpreting of a distant speaker, where the interpreter has a video-mediated view of that speaker but no view of the other participants at a given event.

2.1.2.2 Audio Remote Interpreting ICT-enabled interpreting of a distant speaker, where the interpreter has neither a video-mediated nor direct view of that speaker or any other participants at a given event. (Constable, 2015:6)

This study refers to RSI in line with the definition given by Bachir and Martin, “any form of interpreting in which the interpreter is physically removed from the speakers and/or listeners of the communicative act in which s/he is involved, regardless of whether these other participants share a location or are also remote from each other” (Bachir, Martin, 2022:23).

4. From the Booth to the Cloud

After 2020, once the initial hurdle to manage widespread distance simultaneous interpreting was overcome with the added functionality of platforms such as Zoom, Kudo or Interactio, the advantages of RSI over OSI flooded the market to emphasize, for instance, that the consoles needed in the traditional sound-proof booth, and the audio equipment mandatory on-location to cover the number of the listeners can be replaced by cloud-based technology which facilitates localization. Moreover, the challenge of finding interpreters locally for OSI, the need to cover their travel and accommodation expenses would no longer apply, as RSI has wide global outreach. A major advantage of RSI is also the lack of geographical boundaries in the way of setting up a professional interpreting environment. Local logistical support in OSI is not only costly but also time consuming, whereas RSI does not require transportation of equipment, which leads to costs of services provided by cloud-based platforms lower than anything OSI involves. On closer inspection, further advantages surface, but they are beyond the scope of this study, as the perspective bringing them to the forefront belongs neither to the interpreter nor to the listener, but to the client or service provider who manages the technology.

Back on the track of the didactic perspective, if the vantage point is shifted, and center stage is given to the simultaneous interpreter, a steep learning curve emerges, as the simultaneous interpreters are and will be struggling to adapt unless their training addresses the challenges of RSI. Since changes in the job market roll out faster than their implementation in the academic curriculum, the teaching process needs a hard reset, while the learning process involves de-learning.

The simultaneous interpreter is currently undergoing a “rite of passage” (Gennep, 1960) in three stages, forced into “separation” (id.), no longer at ease in the familiar environment of OSI, having mastered the skills to overcome its specific challenges, but thrown from OSI into RSI, whose nuts-and-bolts s/he still needs to decode on the fly during “liminality” (id.). Trainers must understand the students’ skill-related fears and guide their understanding and development as interpreters, facilitating “incorporation” (id.).

In the surveys I carried out at the beginning of an elective BA course from 2021 to 2023, the top fears which surfaced in the answers 128 student respondents gave, with no instruction to consider OSI and RSI separately, include vocabulary, dialects, support materials and technology.

Most students worry about unfamiliar words because their specialization facilitates the acquisition of a wider vocabulary in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences, while SI services are not restricted to these fields. Secondly, they use English on a daily basis during classes, so they sometimes feel they lack the habit of using Romanian words related to specific purposes or fields, such as marketing or IT.

The accent, pace and tone of the speakers are considered hurdles, especially when abrupt shifts occur during speeches with more speakers in conversation, with no time for the interpreters to cognitively adapt or predict them.

The possibility of no materials being available before the event is a stressful scenario, as students are used to relying on written input in their daily learning process. To them, support materials provided less than 24 hours before the event are almost useless, because they tend to focus on the lack of time and information rather than the slight advantage of knowing what to expect.

If academic training in interpreting is done without real-life equipment, handling the console functions and overcoming problems related to sound quality are regarded as a difficulty which interpreters-in-training would prefer to overcome well in advance of the interpreting assignment.

On prompted to express their opinion on OSI vs RSI, 72% consider that doing interpreting from home is somewhat an easier option, carried out in a safer environment. This misconception lies at the root of the present study, as I have noticed that the interpreters-in-training lack awareness of the added challenges ahead which make their experience significantly more difficult than anticipated. To better showcase what this process of separation, liminality and incorporation entails, the key elements and players are brought under scrutiny:

4.1. The Set-up

Simultaneous interpreters in training are, ideally, familiar with the set-up of the booth and how to operate the buttons on the console. On the other hand, different platforms used in RSI have different technical requirements. Local support available on-site in OSI is invaluable, as professional interpreters know well, and they understand how reassuring it can be to know sound issues can be solved promptly by technicians on-site. Turning to RSI, agencies can help simultaneous interpreters, but any problems or technical glitches at the interpreters’ end are sometimes impossible to predict or solve while they are handling the interpreting activity. The simultaneous interpreters in training clearly need to become more tech savvy than before 2020, and feel comfortable enough to handle the requirements of different platforms.

Flexibility is a soft skill trainers should target in view of helping simultaneous interpreters to develop, because the advantage of no geographical boundaries entails being available to accommodate different time zones, resulting in the need to adapt to a wider, therefore busier schedule.

The fear of a connection failure is constant, as interpreters cannot fully control their work environment (home office) outside their room (Ordeig 2019). A neighbor drilling next-

door or a power failure in the area would affect the interpreting activity and there is nothing anyone can do to solve it instantly. Depending on experience and personality, the release of cortisol because of stress and anxiety will be difficult to prevent, which will impact on the interpreter's ability to concentrate.

4.2. The Speaker

In OSI, beyond a voice in the listener's portable headset, the interpreter exists. Somewhere in a booth at the back of the conference room, interpreters are identifiable, and the speakers can see them. Even if momentarily aware of the simultaneous interpreter's presence, some speakers will slow down the rate of their speech because they know the quality of the translation will be better as a result. It is often the case that the conference organizers draw the speaker's attention at the beginning of an event to the simultaneous interpreting service provided. In OSI, unfortunately, simultaneous interpreters are invisible to the speaker. The local support on-site stands out a major advantage in OSI, whereas the tech team in RSI will not interrupt the speakers during their speech to ask them to speak up, unless more interpreters flag a problem.

The new challenges the simultaneous interpreter must overcome are related to the two channels which are the very foundation of the interpreting activity – the audio and the visual. Once audio-related challenges are in focus, several observations can be made. If the speakers are not instructed in due time to wear a microphone and make sure the quality of the embedded videos in their presentation is the highest, simultaneous interpreters will have to struggle with decoding muffled audio, as the speakers are not aware that SI is ongoing behind the virtual scenes. As for the visual issues – the configuration of RSI platforms must accommodate multiple functionalities, which is a problem because the SI has a limited view of the speaker, with no body language available to enhance the speech. The lack of a multi-sensory experience for the interpreter has been associated with “allocating additional cognitive resources to comprehension processes during simultaneous interpreting and therefore depriving other parts of the process, notably production, of the resources necessary to maintain a high level of performance during normal turn time” (Moser-Mercer, 2005). Even more problematic is the small view of the presentation the speaker shares, with data and text impossible to follow, especially if the simultaneous interpreter has a saved local copy with notes and is trying to run parallel scrolling. Early assessments of the interpreters' performance in a remote setting draw attention to the effect of maintaining the same turn-taking schedule as the average one in OSI:

As to the onset of fatigue, hence the onset of decline in performance, we observed the same interpreter will tire faster (error rates increase) between the middle and the end of a turn in the remote condition as compared to the live condition, where error rate increases are known to occur past the normal end of turn time (past the 30 minute mark on average) (Moser-Mercer, Künzli & Korac 1997:47). The onset of fatigue under remote conditions, as evidenced by a decrease in performance, appears to occur fairly soon after “half-time”, i.e. somewhere between 15 and 18 minutes into a 30-minute turn. Quality of performance then declines constantly irrespective of time of day.... We therefore need to conclude that remote interpretation increases an interpreter's mental workload and leads to fatigue and decline in performance faster than live interpretation (Moser-Mercer 2003).

4.3. The Listener

In the OSI environment, the listener is aware of the presence of the simultaneous interpreter because the booth is visible, so a small gesture of the listener can signal any audio issues to the simultaneous interpreter. In the online environment, the simultaneous interpreter is completely invisible, nothing more than a disembodied voice. The presence of the support team on-site ensures all audio issues are solved on the spot, while the more demanding set-up of RSI requires the listeners to have basic technical skills and access the right channel themselves in order to benefit from the interpreting service.

The invisibility of the remote simultaneous interpreter completely cancels the listener's perception of the interpreting service as being human-driven. In view of convincing the listener to trust the interpreting service, simultaneous interpreters should make extra efforts to improve tone, diction and articulation, features which give pragmatic substance to the oral discourse. If the speaker pauses for a few seconds, the listener might take the simultaneous interpreter's pause as a technical issue. That is why simultaneous interpreters should be trained to use more strategies to fill in these pauses and keep the listener informed, focused and engaged.

4.4. The Second Interpreter

The OSI activity takes place in the booth. It accommodates two interpreters per language, while in RSI each interpreter for the same language pair is miles away. Given the cognitive overload of SI, the standard turns every 20-30 minutes reinforce the importance of teamwork. Training sessions ought to focus on the key role of the second interpreter not only to ensure a fluid transfer of the message but also to contribute to each interpreter's sense of reassurance that the virtual booth partner is on standby. Unfortunately, RSI leans more towards individual work because the extra steps interpreters need to take to get help are most of the time too difficult.

Communication between the two interpreters in RSI is kept via an extra channel, either WhatsApp or direct message, on the conference interpreting platform. Therefore, the simultaneous interpreter must feel comfortable handling technology quickly and confidently, skills that can be trained alongside distributive attention to ensure prompt reactions. Handover is more complicated than on-site where interpreters are next to each other. Even if an initial agreement to switch every 15-20 minutes is reached in advance, the imperfect sync between the active simultaneous interpreter turning off the microphone as the second simultaneous interpreter turns it on might result in overlapping phrases in the listener's ear, or source segments lost in translation. This process runs smoothly only if the interpreters can listen to each other and handle instant handovers, jumping in a second after the team interpreter shuts up. However, one problem is that the set-up of some platforms does not allow parallel listening. Workarounds can be found, for example if the passive interpreter listens to the speaker in one ear using one computer, logged in as a simultaneous interpreter, and to the 2nd interpreter if s/he is simultaneously logged in as a participant from a second device. This would be impossible to handle by those interpreters who prefer to hear the speaker in both ears. Approximately 47% of the respondents in my class feel more comfortable doing interpreting with both ears covered, which would make the solution above impossible to apply. At the same time, another disadvantage is that the interpreters cannot help each other with unknown terms, written notes or sudden handover if they cannot listen to both channels simultaneously.

5. Conclusions

The most important lessons interpreting trainers need to teach involve dismantling assumptions that the skills developed for on-site simultaneous interpreting are sufficient in carrying out the same service in a virtual setting. These are lessons which interpreters-in-training must de-learn in view of a smoother and more comfortable shift between OSI to RSI. Cloud-based services mean connection, but it is obvious that the simultaneous interpreter is not really connected to any key player involved in the RSI set-up. Accessing a local annotated copy of the speaker's presentation is not feasible, as the interpreter would have to make the source window smaller. The interpreter cannot rely on the immediate help of the second interpreter as readily as in the OSI environment. Local support has taken on a different meaning when it comes to RSI because there are limitations of what the tech team behind the scenes can do for adequate assistance. Any disturbance in the interpreter's local environment becomes a challenge difficult to overcome, which, in turn, requires far better self-control and stress-management

skills to support concentration. Although simultaneous interpreters apply themselves to providing a useful and pleasant service to the listener, a simple handover of the mike sooner than the agreed turn ends, sometimes during the same presentation will cause unwanted disruption in the audio flow experienced by the listener.

How about the key lessons ahead to make sure that students are better prepared for the challenges of the job market? Once the main challenges are acknowledged, more skills need improvement. RSI requires interpreters to handle many activities individually, rather than in a team. RSI is not just about keeping up with technology. It is more about the trainers and the student-interpreters' willingness to be a step ahead and in control of handling its advance to the benefit of qualitative services. Multi-tasking and distributive attention should become a priority in training the future generation of interpreters. Even if the speaker uses visual support and shares it with the audience, simultaneous interpreters ought to learn to focus more on the audio rather than struggle to see anything on the screen. Moreover, priority has to be given to self-monitoring, to make sure the interpreter's voice alone captures the essence of the source message, giving the listeners reassurance that RSI benefits most from a reliable human presence.

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