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An incomplete account of the thoughts expressed last Saturday on Distance Conference Interpreting

The views expressed herein are the personal views of the author.

I use the term Distance Interpreting as the generic term to describe all situations where interpreters are not in the same room with the speakers, or the audience or both the speakers and the audience.

There is an ongoing discussion about the definition and utility of terms such as teleconference interpreting, videoconference interpreting, audioconference interpreting, remote interpreting, video remote interpreting, audio remote interpreting, multiscreen of single screen video remote interpreting, etc.

Technological progress and conference interpreting

Recent progress in web conferencing technology gives the possibility to conference interpreters to provide simultaneous interpreting from a distance.

Such progress was achieved by web conferencing providers who allow people to meet without travelling. The business case consists in a series of financial and environmental benefits.

"Platforms" support "100% decentralised" conferences where no one has to be in the same location with anybody else. The concepts of main speaker, main audience, conference room become irrelevant.

In the 100% decentralised paradigm, conference interpreters are treated as any other category of participants: they can be located at their office or at home. After all, isn't this the whole purpose of web conferencing? No one should have to move; interpreters can also work alone from their home or office.

The additional bonus for conference organisers is that hiring a certain language/ language combination is not limited to a certain country or continent or time zone. Availability of interpreters should not be an issue anymore.

I will support the view that the main problem of the 100% decentralised model ignores a fundamental feature of conference interpreting, teamwork.

Distance conference interpreting is still conference interpreting, only more difficult. The new (business) model fails to recognise this: lack of co-location of interpreters (working

into the same language) does not meet the needs of/ provide adequate working conditions to conference interpreters. The product offered is not conference interpreting anymore.

By the way, what is conference interpreting?

In the course of the drafting of ISO 23155 (Conference interpreting services) the working group realised that decades after Nuremberg the definition of conference interpreting is still work in progress. I had to go back to think what a "conference" is in the first place and why conference interpreting is different to other emulations of interpreting.

I support the view that conference interpreting is *long* consecutive and simultaneous.

So, what is a conference in the first place?

The current definition of "conference" in ISO 23155:

conference

a structured formal meeting, or set of meetings, following an established agenda in which issues, ideas and policies are discussed

A conference is indeed a structured event, planned ahead of time, on a specific date, beginning and ending at specific times, with an agenda, sessions and speakers in a specific order, which must flow without interruptions from beginning to end. Another characteristic is that speakers/ experts on the subject prepare specialised presentations for weeks or months that they usually read out at speed.

And why is conference interpreting different?

The discussion at ISO then continued on the definition of conference interpreting, as opposed to other categories of interpreting. What makes conference interpreting different? What makes conference interpreting more difficult?

conference interpreting

interpreting used for multilingual communication at political, scientific, technical and other formal meetings

Consecutive interpreting served international conferences exclusively until the invention of simultaneous interpreting. The best way available until then was at least to not interrupt individual speakers, hence "*long* consecutive".

Conference interpreting (long consecutive and simultaneous) ensure minimum disruption of a highly structured, formal event.

At a conference, interpreters cannot influence the flow of the event, they cannot interrupt speakers to ask questions, they must deal with speakers who try to pack as much information in the limited time allotted to them, they must cope every day with a different domain (not the case with e.g. healthcare interpreting) and cope with state-of-the-art knowledge -conferences come at a cost and they make sense when specialists get together to discuss latest progress in their domain.

Conference interpreting is teamwork

This leads to the following thought: for all these reasons, conference interpreting is a demanding team sport. It takes at least two interpreters to provide conference interpreting, not only because interpreters must take over from their colleagues after a number of minutes but because of all the things an interpreter does while her colleague is interpreting.

In the current draft of ISO 23155 this is endorsed in the following way:

Teamwork between conference interpreters

Conference interpreting requires continuous communication and coordination between conference interpreters working at a conference.

In simultaneous interpreting, conference interpreters interpreting into the same outgoing channel shall be able to communicate with booth partners visually, orally and by touch and shall therefore sit in the same booth to:

- support booth partners when numbers, acronyms or proper names are read out at speed;
- support booth partners when unfamiliar or technical terms are used;
- help booth partners who are following a written document read out by a speaker at speed (especially when the speaker omits a paragraph or changes the order of the presentation);
- monitor the outgoing channel of booth partners (in a bidirectional booth);
- monitor the incoming channel of booth partners (to avoid using relay unnecessarily);
- coordinate with booth partners in the case of technical problems;
- take turns for unpredictable reasons (such as an attack of coughing or other condition).

This requirement shall also apply to distance simultaneous interpreting where increased stress and cognitive load are additional factors.

This is exactly what is **not** provided by the 100% decentralised model where each interpreter works from a different location.

So, what is our problem?

The problem is quality. In the 100% decentralised model (= no co-location of interpreters), quality suffers because of:

1. Additional stress resulting from the feeling of "remoteness" (exists even when two interpreters work together);
2. Additional cognitive load and stress resulting from the virtual, non-intuitive console (new tasks not related to interpreting (chat), excessive multitasking, distractions from interpreting per se);
3. Additional work load and stress resulting from the absence of a booth mate, thus **removing teamwork from conference interpreting;**
4. Uncertainty in view of lack of technical support (when working from home).

While the psychological aspects (1) are a subject of research and (2) could be eventually addressed by the integration of traditional consoles in platforms and other improvements, the absence of booth mates cannot be compensated.

Too much time has been dedicated to assessing the "takeover" feature offered by various platforms; the problem is not what happens during the 20 seconds of the takeover, the problem is what happens in the booth during the e.g. 19'40" in between.

Teamwork is so much at the heart of conference interpreting that (3) is, I believe, what threatens the core of the concept of conference interpreting.

This problem does not result from technology. Platforms were invented to serve the 100% decentralised model, but they don't have to be used this way, i.e. with interpreters working alone. The problem is that the new *business* model pushes distance conference interpreting to the extreme, to lower costs but also because platform owners are generally not familiar with our profession.

The fact that something is made possible thanks to technology, does not mean this is a best practice -for safety, security or quality reasons. An airplane can be flown London-Madrid with one pilot; actually, technically it can also be flown without a pilot, as a drone. But this is not done because the safety of 180 passengers is at stake.

In conference interpreting the stake is effective multilingual communication at any one-time event, which represents a considerable investment for the organiser.

So, the *business* model that has conference interpreters (of the same language) working solo from dispersed locations is not adequate or acceptable for conference interpreting purposes. It may fit other purposes, but not conference interpreting.

The truth is there are many categories of meetings (short, easy, informal, improvised) that can, indeed, be served from home, despite issues such as connection quality and redundancy, confidentiality, technical support, ambient noise and distractions. **But this is not our market.** However, there is more at stake here that I will try to explain further down.

It is not a coincidence that platforms that were developed in cooperation with or with the advice of established conference interpreters tend to be in favour of "co-location", i.e. conference interpreters of the same language (same booth/ outgoing channel) working from the same booth or work space.

It is generally accepted that all booths should ideally be co-located too, but, realistically, we should not expect this model will apply in all cases.

So, how do we combine conference interpreting with web conferences?

A solution exists, **the hub**.

Hubs ensure:

- Co-location
- Adequate internet connections (bandwidth, stability and redundancy)
- Technical support
- Protection from disturbances
- Rest area for interpreters, etc.

Interpreter-owned hubs will empower interpreters to address the following issues -that must be seriously discussed sooner than later among conference interpreters at large:

(this a very brief summary of a longer presentation)

- The blurring of the dividing line between distance conference interpreting and other categories of distance interpreting. The fact that they can both be provided online is confusing even for experienced users.
- The power of platform owners/operators: they have the potential of becoming global players, unlike even the biggest current equipment providers. They will be tempted to infiltrate the distance conference interpreting market with tremendous implications for quality, hiring patterns, team strength, fees.
- Platforms are essentially start-ups today but the best of them will become global players.
- Market control: big platforms (being global players) will have vastly superior presence on the web. Traditional players (including AIIC) risk to lose visibility. Even the largest AIIC consultant interpreters may become invisible. If you are not on the first page in a Google search, essentially you do not exist in commercial terms.
- Even if big platforms decided to work with "mainstream" interpreters, they will have far superior negotiating power over working conditions. If really big tech companies (the size of e.g. Samsung) ever decide to invest in language services (tempted by AI) we may see them pass from marketing superiority to gaining market supremacy.
- In the private market, consultant ("recruiting") interpreters have been doing the work for conference organisers until now essentially for free (*subject of a different presentation*). Even the most successful consultant interpreters work on a national scale, with perhaps a few big international customers. They do not

have the scale to advertise, pay administrative staff, offer other language services (more and more clients go for integrated solutions).

- Access to the profession: Up until now conference interpreters accede to the profession after completing a university course, they are accredited by an international organisation, they gain recognition through word of mouth. The new business model allows anyone with a laptop and an internet connection to pretend to be an interpreter (just like in the translation world, anyone with a computer and an internet connection is a translator). People already register on large "interpreters'" databases created by platforms without any vetting; no evaluation procedure, no questions asked. So, more competition for real conference interpreters.
- Code of Professional Ethics: The invisibility of interpreters working solo from unknown locations means that it will be more difficult to enforce our Code of Professional Ethics. It will be more difficult to know who does what: working hours, breaks, language combination offered, competence, quality. For example, vouching for an interpreter's work practices in view to AIIC membership becomes more complicated. The same applies to peer review and peer pressure in favour of the values of the profession.
- Professional domicile: becomes somewhat irrelevant in the online world. The more expensive markets will incur losses.
- Travel patterns: interpreters will travel less, but there are many interpreters who would rather travel less.

My message:

- Conference interpreters should embrace technological progress without fear. We should be at the forefront and set the rules to protect quality in conference interpreting.
- We should work with technology owners to help them better understand conference interpreting.
- We should educate our clients about the different categories of interpreting.
- Interpreters must take advantage of an exciting opportunity: the cost of infrastructure is much lower (hub = the means of delivery of distance conference interpreting globally) compared to acquiring booths, consoles, hundreds of expensive headsets, radiators, etc. We can thus access a global market, not just our city or country. This is the only way to maintain control of our profession and access to clients.