

**DISTANCE INTERPRETING:
A NUREMBERG MOMENT FOR OUR TIME?**

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1. Summary

With the advent of distance interpreting, the interpreting profession could be described as facing a Nuremberg moment, a moment when the arrival of a new technology would fundamentally change that profession forever. Distance interpreting is not limited to either the conference or public service interpreting spheres, and it can even blur them, making simultaneous interpretation technically feasible where the appropriate infrastructure had previously been unavailable.

What makes distance interpreting particularly challenging however is that it deprives interpreters of certain sensory inputs. Multi-sensory inputs are processed simultaneously in order to form understanding, and all other factors being equal, the more inputs are available simultaneously, the greater ease we have in constructing meaning. The fewer sensory inputs available to us, the more effort is needed to do so, and the more likely it is that input be misconstrued.

However, not all forms of distance interpreting are alike where it concerns the sensory input available to interpreters. Whereas video-conference interpreting affords the interpreter at least a direct view of the participants at an event, this direct view is not available in a remote setting.

Despite the constraints, the goal of professional interpreters is to work to the highest level of quality. In order to do this, a greater cognitive effort is required in remote interpretation. This additional effort tires interpreters faster, which in turn leads to a far more rapid decline in quality in remote than in on-site interpreting modes.

Whilst interpreting studies literature has shown that the same level of quality can be achieved in remote interpretation, there is a cost to enabling this, a cost borne by the interpreter.

Literature on and indeed practice in remote interpreting supports alternative working conditions for remote interpreting, even when the optimal technical requirements are met (which is rarely the case).

It is clear that remote interpreting has moved far beyond the confines of public service interpreting, where it is already commonplace in the medical and judicial fields, and firmly into the conference sphere. It is therefore hoped that an ISO and revised AIIC code on new technologies, specifically covering the various modes of distance interpreting, will provide interpreters and interpreter managers with a firm basis for setting out rules and working conditions governing these new modes of interpretation.

It is the intention of this consultative working paper¹ to propose a framework of definitions for distance interpreting, to highlight key passages of relevant interpreting studies literature and provide potential input for both an ISO and a revised AIIC code in this area which differentiates between the different modes of distance interpreting. It is not the intention of this paper to make concrete suggestions as to what those working conditions should be, other than to suggest that

¹ The first version of this consultative working paper was presented at the AIIC Private Market Sector (PRIMS) meeting in Brussels, 12 January 2013 during the panel on remote interpreting. Feedback was incorporated into a later version, presented at the AIIC Staff Interpreters Committee (CdP) on 17 August 2013 in Nouméa. The model and definitions in this paper also featured in the presentation Videoconferencing in International Criminal Proceedings: an Interpreter Perspective, made at the Informal Technical Group on Video Conference Interpreting meeting in Luxembourg on 6 December 2013. The author would like to thank all those who have contributed to the final model and definitions contained herein: AIIC PRIMS and CdP members, and members of the Informal Technical Group on Video Conference Interpreting alike.

there should be a correlation between sensory input (or lack of it) and the relevant working conditions – manning strengths, working hours etc.

2. Distance interpreting: Definitions

There are many – sometimes contradictory – definitions of distance interpreting and its various sub-components in remote interpreting pilot studies, interpreting studies literature and on interpreting websites, including AIIC’s.

Whereas AIIC’s *Code for the Use of New Technologies in Conference Interpretation* provides for an upper limit for video-conference interpreting of not more than two hours a day, no such conditions currently apply to remote interpreting which it deems “unacceptable”. This contrasts with AIIC’s website however, which shows “remote interpreting services²” (even including webcasts in this category) being offered by 19 AIIC consultants and consultancies. It is also the case that remote interpreting is already being negotiated or even implemented in several of the organisations represented by AIIC’s staff interpreters’ committee.

“the temptation to divert certain technologies from their primary purpose e.g. by putting interpreters in front of monitors or screens to interpret at a distance a meeting attended by participants assembled in one place (i.e. tele-interpreting), is unacceptable” *Code for the use of New Technologies in Conference Interpretation*

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AIIC consultants by services

AIIC consultants and consultancies provide the following services to event organisers.

Fields of practice

- conference interpreting services (simultaneous, consecutive) – 21 consultants
- remote interpreting services (videoconference, webcast) – 20 consultants
- telephone interpreting services – 18 consultants

However this is just a symptom of the real problem³. Not only are different terms found in the literature to describe the various forms of ICT-enabled distance interpreting, but confusingly the same terms are sometimes used to denote different things. Audio-enabled distance interpreting is referred to as telephone interpreting and tele-conference interpreting (AIIC, 2000), whilst audiovisually-enabled distance interpreting is also referred to as video-mediated interpreting (Braun et al, 2011). The latter can be subdivided into two categories: audiovisually-enabled distance interpreting with a direct view of one or more participants (also known as video-conferencing), audiovisually-enabled distance interpreting with no

² <http://aiic.net/directories/consultants/services/>

³ The following paragraphs are an extract from an (as yet unpublished) thesis for the University of Geneva on “The Impact of New Technologies in the Interpreter Workplace: a Case Study of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)”, by Polycarp Ambe-Niba (ECCC) and Andrew Constable (ICC)

direct view of any participants (also known as tele-interpreting (AIIC, 2000), remote conferencing (Buck, 2000), remote interpreting, and video remote interpreting). Remote interpreting is described 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, p. 12). Meanwhile videoconferencing is defined by European Parliament staff interpreter Panayotis Mouzourakis as “where the interpreter is still physically present in the meeting room where most delegates are gathered, except for one or more participants who are attending remotely via a video link-up” (Buck 2000, p. 2).

For Moser-Mercer, remote interpreting is used to describe a situation where interpretation is provided for a bi- or multilingual video-conference by interpreters who are physically remote from the meeting room and thus do not have a direct view of speakers and delegates. Video-conference interpreting on the other hand denotes a meeting scenario where participants are distributed across two or more sites with interpreters located at one of them (Moser-Mercer, 2011).

Although strictly speaking the term remote interpreting can include telephone interpreting, it is more often used in the literature to denote remote video-mediated interpreting or video remote interpreting. This is also the same as Braun’s definition within the framework of the AVIDICUS project “Remote interpreting (RI) is the form of interpreting used when the proceedings take place at a single location with the interpreter working via video link from a remote location” (Braun, 2011, p. 33). Braun describes Videoconference interpreting (VCI) as the form of interpreting that arises when the proceedings take place at two different locations that are video-linked and an interpreter is required to facilitate the communication with the interpreter either in the main room with the participants or co-located with the other-language speaker (Braun, 2011).

The key difference between video remote interpreting and video-conference interpreting is the direct view of the audience available to the interpreter in the latter. In video-conference interpreting, one or more of the speaking participants are remote, whereas the interpreter is physically on-site with a direct view of the audience, whilst in remote interpreting, the interpreter has neither a direct view of the speaker nor the audience (indeed generally not even a video-mediated view of the audience). It is the impact of the lack of the direct audience view and the associated feedback mechanisms that would otherwise be available to the interpreter that is the source of much debate in interpreting literature where it concerns specific difficulties of remote interpreting.

Whatever terms and definitions are taken for the field of distance interpreting, it is crucial that they indicate the degree of sensory input that will be available to the interpreter in that mode with a view to adopting relevant working conditions.

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

3. Multi-Sensory Integration in Human Communication

3.1. What is multi-sensory integration, and why is it relevant to the debate on distance interpreting?

Humans use multi-sensory inputs, processed simultaneously, in order to form understanding. Generally speaking, the more inputs are available simultaneously, the greater ease we have in constructing meaning. The fewer sensory inputs available to us, the more effort is needed to do so, and the more likely it is that input be misconstrued.

“Humans possess an impressive array of specialized sensory systems that allow them to monitor simultaneously a host of environmental cues. This “parallel” processing of multiple cues not only increases the probability of detecting a given stimulus but, because the information carried along each sensory channel reflects a different feature of that stimulus, it also increases the likelihood of its accurate identification. In many circumstances, events are more readily perceived, have less ambiguity, and elicit a response far more rapidly when signaled by the coordinated action of multiple sensory modalities. Sensory systems have evolved to work in concert, and normally, different sensory cues that originate from the same event are concordant in both space and time. The products of this spatial and temporal coherence are synergistic intersensory interactions within the central nervous system, interactions that are presumed to enhance the salience of the initiating event. Thus, for example, seeing a speaker’s face makes the spoken message far easier to understand (Sumbly and Pollack: 1954⁴), which is why conference interpreters insist on a direct view of the speaker and the meeting room. And rightly so, their insistence finds its justification in the special nature of our sensory systems.” (Moser-Mercer, 2005, p. 728).

3.2 Multi-sensory integration in videoconferencing and the judiciary. The case of Proteis Zigiranyirazo

While much has been said about the resistance of interpreters to distance interpreting in its various forms, it is important to see whether other professionals believe that a degree of multi-sensory deprivation can jeopardise their ability to perform their work effectively and accurately. Such was the debate that occurred in the trial of Proteis Zigiranyirazo before the International Criminal Tribunal in Rwanda.

On 31 January 2006, the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in the Protais Zigiranyirazo case denied a request made by the Prosecution to hear the testimony of a key witness by video-link, preferring to travel to The Netherlands instead to hear the testimony due to their concern as to their ability to “to effectively and accurately assess the testimony and demeanour” of Mr. Bagaragaza if he testified by video-link, and stating that accused had a right to confront this witness in person.

⁴ Sumbly, W.H., and I. Pollack (1954): Visual Contribution to Speech Intelligibility in Noise, *Journal of the Acoustic Society of America*, 26, p. 212-215.

However, when it transpired that Zigiranyirazo would not be allowed into The Netherlands, the Chamber decided that it would travel to Camp Zeist along with one of the defence counsel for the accused, whereas Zigiranyirazo would follow the proceedings from Arusha via video-link.

Appealing this Decision, the Defence argued however that neither Zigiranyirazo nor his lead counsel, who remained with him in Arusha, could observe either the judges or the witness unless the camera was pointed on them, thereby denying them normal visual interaction with the proceedings. The Appeals Chamber, in its Decision on Interlocutory Appeal of 30 October 2006, decided to exclude all of the testimony that was taken via video-link on the grounds that that the Trial Chamber had failed to accord the accused the right to be present at his own trial, adding “although one of the Appellant’s counsel was in the courtroom with the Judges and the witness, the Appellant himself was thousands of kilometres away, connected to the proceedings only by means of audio-visual equipment. The Appellant’s sense of being wronged in such circumstances is well-understandable”.

3.2. Does remote interpreting impact on quality, fatigue or stress?

Even under the best technological conditions, the remote interpreter has to make an effort above and beyond what is usual on-site in order to interpret in a remote setting, “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). Such cognitive resource redeployment leads to the early onset of fatigue which in turn results in a deterioration of quality.

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). 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 consistently 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).

However, Roziner & Shlesinger (2010) do not accept this as having general application to remote interpreting, pointing out that this is the only study to demonstrate a faster decline in quality in comparison to on-site interpreting. Although interpreters in most pilot studies voiced their feelings of poorer performance and greater stress under remote interpreting conditions, these are considered to be subjective indicators and thereby questionable. Objective indicators on the other hand would be the evaluation of the interpretation by a qualified panel – hence the acceptance of Moser-Mercer’s (2003) findings as relate to that individual study, or measurements of cortisol or blood pressure in relation to stress levels.

Although such “objective indicators” are not questioned in the literature, interpreters readily admit to employing deliberate stress-reducing mechanisms during interpretation, such as slower breathing, trying to sound calmer, different posture etc. It is quite feasible for an interpreter to sound calm whilst actually being under considerable stress. A key question, however, is whether such stress-reducing mechanisms, successfully deployed, can actually have a physiological impact, for example on cortisol levels and blood pressure. If so – and there is no reason for assuming they are without any impact – then interpreters may be aware that they are under stress yet able to avail themselves of an array of mechanisms to manage that stress or even reduce its physical manifestations. Certainly this would be an interesting area of research that is yet to be addressed.

Moser-Mercer’s (2003) findings were recently backed by Sabine Braun, however, writing about video-mediated interpreting (remote and videoconference) in criminal proceedings:

Fatigue can be assumed to be directly linked to the interpreting performance. One of the AVIDICUS comparative studies analysed the distribution of interpreting problems on the timeline of the face-to-face and video-based sessions (Braun & Taylor in this volume). This analysis revealed a greater increase in the number of interpreting problems during the video-based sessions, which became more noticeable in the second half of the sessions. The video-based sessions show, for

example, a steep increase in the number of paralinguistic problems, which are often indicative of a cognitive overload. Moser-Mercer (2003) reported similar findings from her study on remote conference interpreting (Braun, 2011, p.279).

Beyond the technical recommendations, it is essential that where remote interpreting is implemented, it is accompanied by the working conditions that ensure that neither the quality of the interpretation nor above all the health of the interpreters is jeopardized by this development, and the two, as discussed above, are necessarily linked. Braun makes the following recommendation:

The duration of an interpreter's turn in a video link will require attention. The conference interpreting profession has adopted 30-minute turns as the standard duration of a working turn for a conference interpreter. Our data and Moser-Mercer's study show a decline in the interpreting quality (increase in the number of errors) after approximately 15 to 20 minutes, suggesting that interpreters may not be able to work for an extended period of time in a video link. What is noteworthy is that the guidelines for remote interpreting issued by the Wisconsin Circuit courts, which recommended 30 minute turns in 2006, were revised in 2010 and now recommend 15 minutes as the maximum length (Braun, 2011, p. 279).

4. Appropriate Working Conditions for Various Forms of Distance interpreting

Given the differing levels of sensory input that interpreters receive in the following modes of distance interpreting, any rules drafted need to take this reality into account. Were we to put forward a hierarchy of modes in terms of maximum sensory input, it could possibly appear as follows:

1. Face-to-face
2. Videoconference Interpreting
3. Multiscreen Video Remote Interpreting
4. Single-Screen Video Remote Interpreting
5. Audioconference Interpreting⁵
6. Audio Remote Interpreting

Whilst some in the profession may ask the question as to why we should establish rules for modes in which we don't work or would not want to work, the fact is that AIIC interpreters are working in all of these modes. Yet we have no specific rules pertaining to them, at least not at AIIC level. It may be the case however that individual organisations have developed rules for the particular mode or modes with which they work.

By way of example, diplomatic interpreters are often asked to perform audio remote interpreting via telephone; audioconference interpreting is used at the ICC for certain judges' plenaries, job interviews and audioconferences between the defence and their witnesses in the field; single-screen video remote interpreting has become very common where a booth is placed outside an event due to "lack of space"; multi-screen video remote interpreting is now used for Ministerial and European Council Meetings; and most conference interpreters by now will probably have had to interpret at least one speaker appearing via video-link.

We need to be clear though as to what the differences are between these modes and why they matter. In some ways multiscreen video remote interpreting can be seen as little different to videoconference interpreting, the only difference being the video-mediated or "indirect" view of the participants as opposed to a direct view. Despite the fact that interpreters would agree that a video-mediated view of participants is better than none, the fact is that cameras do not function in the same way as the human eye and camera operators make their own choices, not those of each individual interpreter following the event. Interpreters may experience that it is more tiring, it can cause eyestrain, that the multiscreen mode can be distracting and that the faces of individual participants cannot be seen as clearly as a direct view.

As such we will need to call on interpreters who have experience in working in these various modes of distance interpreting to help us draft the appropriate technical and working conditions to ensure the quality of interpretation and safeguard the health of the interpreters, two issues that are necessarily interlinked.

⁵ Audioconference interpreting would certainly rank in 5th position where the interpreter is interpreting a remote speaker for someone who is present with the interpreter. When the interpreter is interpreting someone else physically present alongside interpreter at the audioconference, obviously the available sensory information is much greater.

5. References

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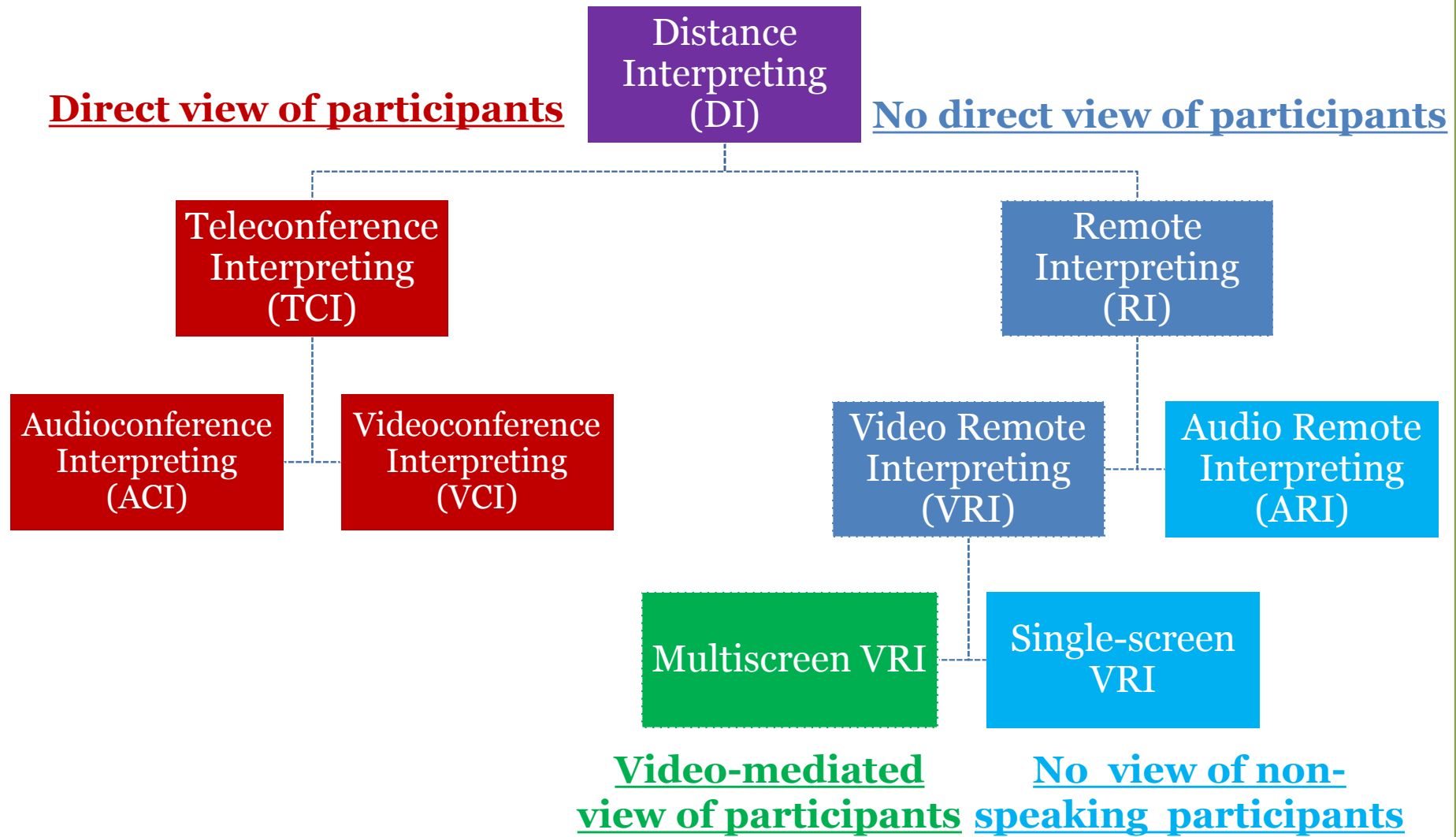
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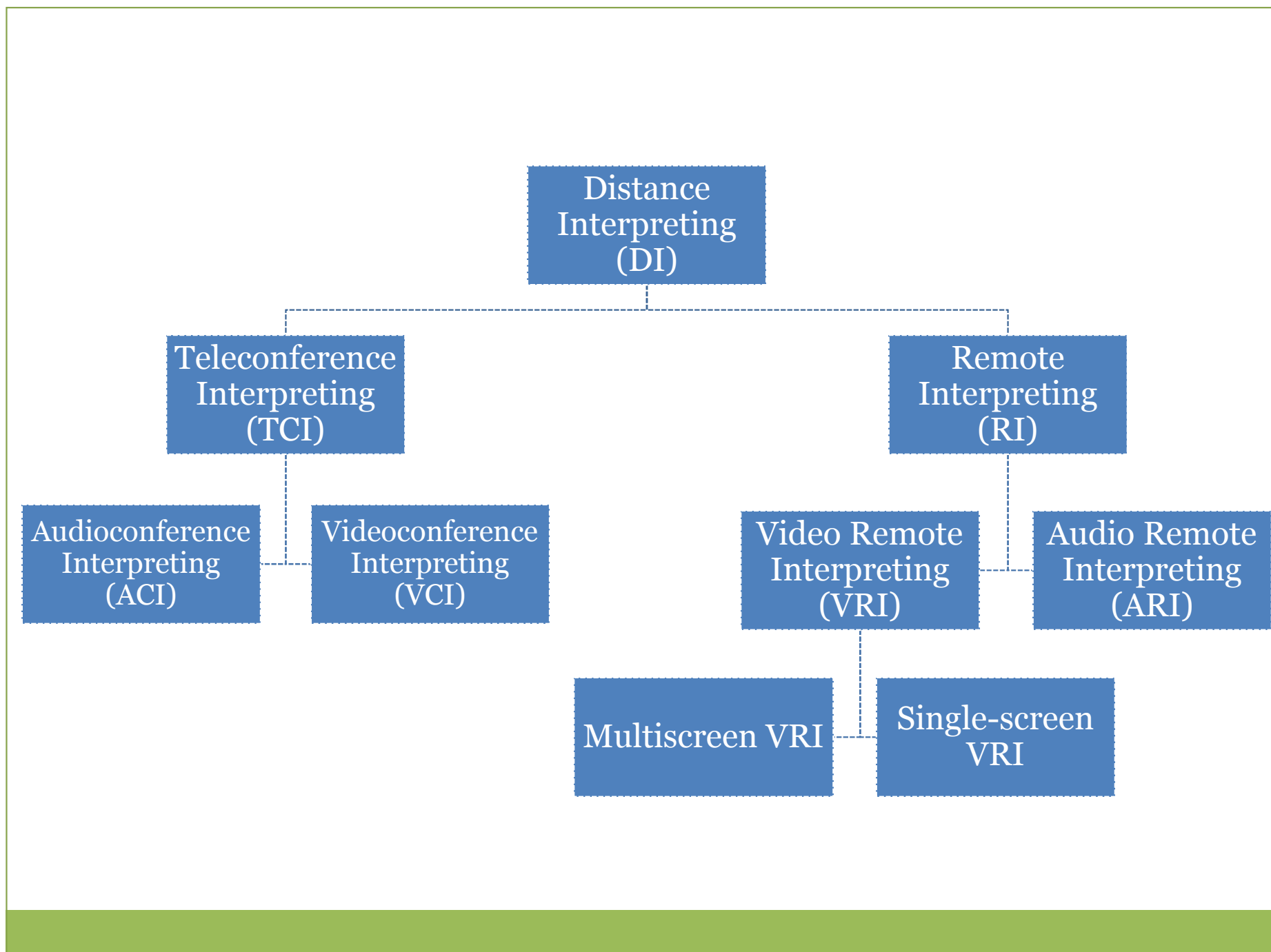
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ICT-enabled Distance Interpreting





Who is “remote”?

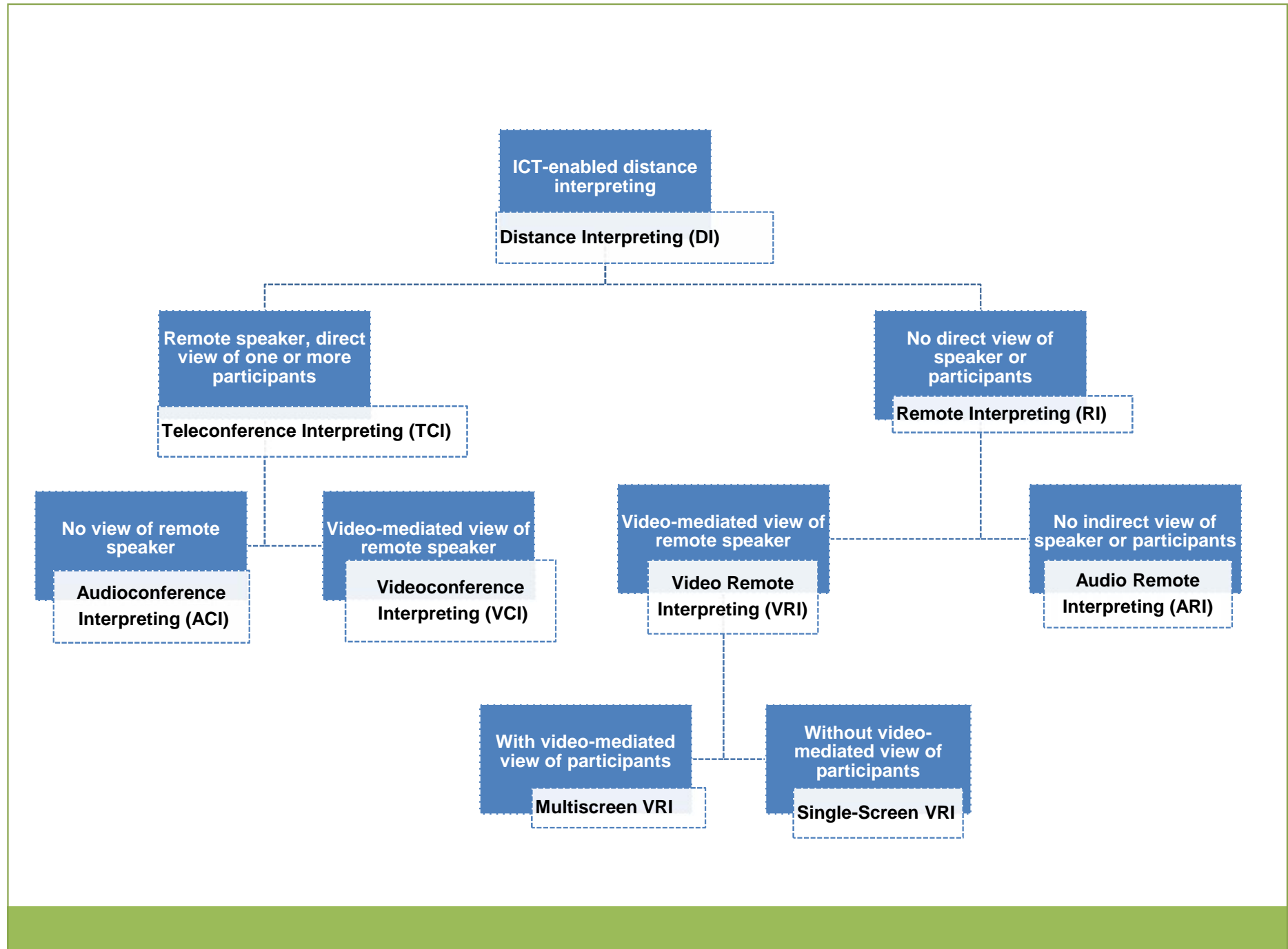


Speaker

- **Teleconference interpreting:**
- **Videoconference interpreting**
- **Audioconference interpreting**

Interpreter

- **Remote Interpreting:**
- **Video Remote Interpreting**
- **Audio Remote Interpreting**



Distance interpreting mode according to (direct or indirect) view of participants



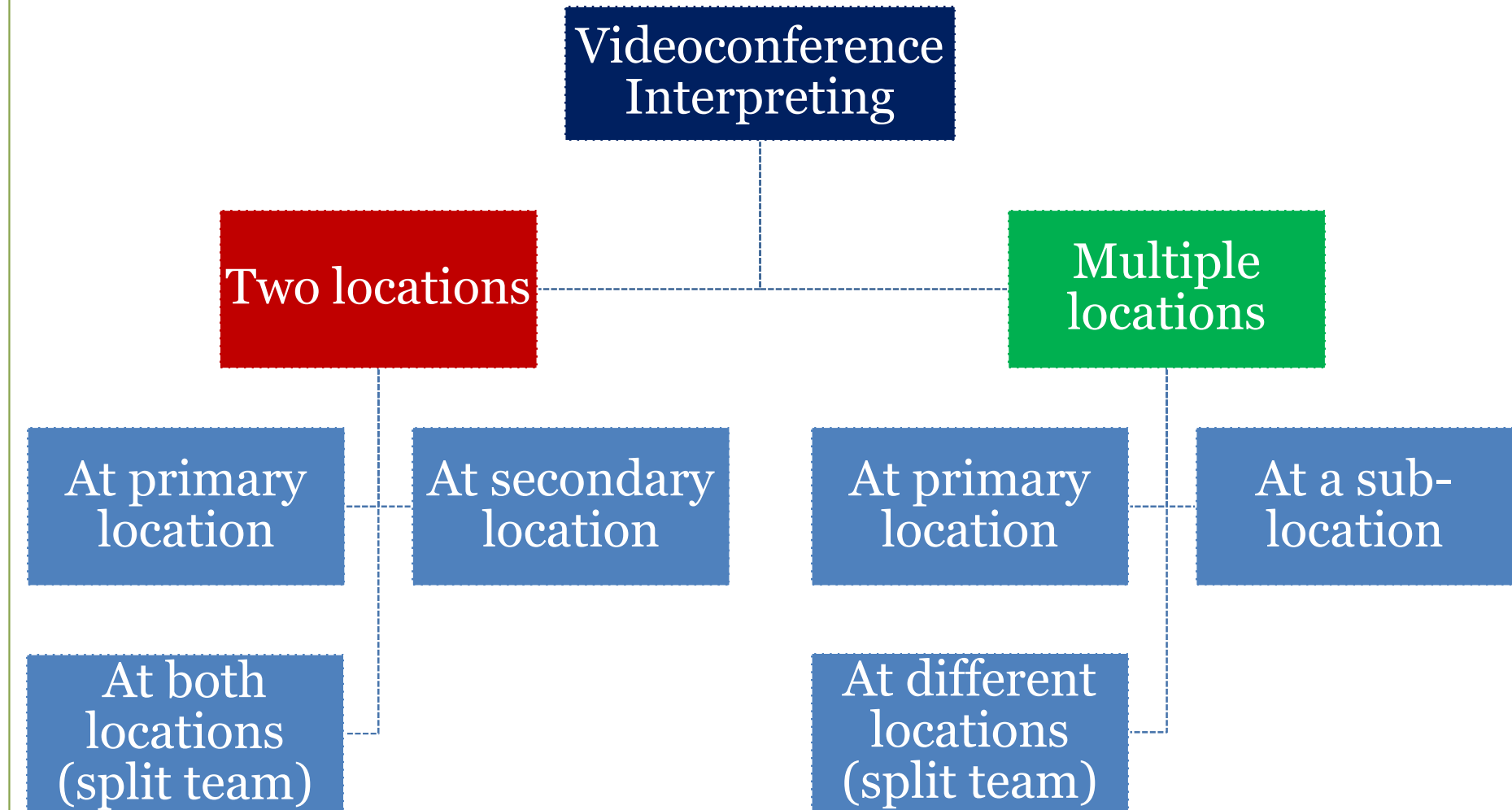
View of Non-Speaking Participants

- **Videoconference interpreting** (direct view of others at event)
- **Audioconference interpreting** (direct view of others at event)
- **Multi-Screen Video Remote Interpreting** (indirect view of non-speaking participants at event)

No View of Non-Speaking Participants

- **Single-Screen Video Remote Interpreting** (1 image, only of speaker)
- **Audio remote interpreting** (no image of speaker or participants)

Location of Interpreter or Interpreting Team



Location of Interpreter or Interpreting Team

