

The Consequences of Fully Remote Interpretation on Interpreter Interaction and Cooperation

A threat to professional cohesion?

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ABSTRACT: The emergence of conference interpreting as a profession, with the related formal attributes of a professional association, a code of ethics, and professionally-run training institutions, coincided with and was facilitated by the spread of simultaneous interpretation (SI) in the post-World War II period. SI enabled the increase in interpreted events and in the number of languages interpreted, thus accompanying the development of a multilingual institutional architecture. Whilst it also marked the beginning of a trend towards the greater distancing of interpreters from meetings, it led to greater proximity with peers, with the formation of interpreter teams. This helped to shape and consolidate informal professional attributes, such as a set of self-beliefs and norms. The greater physical distance of interpreters from the actual event has culminated in remote interpreting configurations of different types, the most extreme being full remote where interpreters interpret from their computers in separate locations.

On-site interpreter interaction encompasses many features, including practical forms of mutual assistance, but it also involves face-saving techniques, the sharing of knowledge and expertise, the alleviation of performance-related tensions and reinforcement of professional cohesion. Professional cohesion is understood here as compliance with a shared set of norms and adherence to shared beliefs, creating a feeling of belonging to and identification with the profession.

The use of remote interpreting involving interpreter home-working (henceforth called full remote) marks a sharp break with on-site teamwork, rendering some forms of cooperation difficult. In the following, we wish

to consider how this might impact interpreter interaction and professional cohesion. To do so, a preliminary investigation of seven meetings has been conducted—two with interpreting on-site and five with interpreters in fully remote mode, with a view to identifying trends and patterns in interpreter exchanges in each. Preliminary observations indicate a notable reduction in some forms of interaction and cooperation. The intention of the article is to open up a new area of investigation and a new angle on the impact of remote interpreting on interpreters and the profession.

KEYWORDS: simultaneous interpretation (SI), fully remote interpretation, interpreter interaction, interpreter professionalization, history of interpreting

논문초록: 국제회의 통역이 하나의 전문직으로 자리잡고, 전문 직업군으로서의 특성, 윤리적 규범, 전문 교육 기관의 형태를 갖추게 된 과정은 2차대전 전후 시기에 동시통역(SI)의 확산과 맞물렸고 또 이에 기인했다 할 수 있겠다. 동시통역 활동 덕분에 통역이 되는 행사와 통역 대상 언어의 수가 증가하였고, 이를 통해 다국어 기구의 형성에 기여하였다. 물론 이 때문에 통역사와 회의와의 물리적 거리는 더 커졌으나 통역 팀이 형성되는 등 통역사들끼리의 거리는 가까워졌다 할 수 있겠다. 이는 결과적으로 통역사의 자기신념이나 규범과 같은 전문직업군으로서의 비공식적 특성이 형성되고 또 정착하는데 기여했다. 실제 회의와 통역사 간의 물리적 거리가 커지면서 다양한 형태의 원격통역 방식이 등장하였는데, 가장 극단적인 통역 방식은 별도의 장소에서 통역사가 컴퓨터를 통해 완전 원격통역을 진행하는 방법일 것이다.

현장에서의 통역사 상호교류는 물론 실질적인 상호지원 등의 형태로 진행되기도 하지만 동시에 체면 유지 기술 활용, 지식과 노하우의 공유, 통역행위와 관련된 긴장의 완화, 통역사 간 화합과 같은 형태를 띠기도 한다. 여기서 통역사 간 화합이란 통역사 집단이 공유되는 규범과 믿음을 준수하고 따르는 것으로 이해해볼 수 있으며 이를 실현하여 통역사로서의 정체성과 소속감을 구축할 수 있게 된다.

통역사가 재택근무를 하는 원격통역 방식(이하 완전 원격)은 현장에서의 협력 양상과는 괴리가 있어 특정 형태의 협력이 어려워진다. 본 소고에서는 이러한 양상이 통역사 간 상호교류와 화합에 어떠한 영향을 주는지 살펴보았다. 이를 위해 일곱 개 회의에 대한 사전 조사를 실시하였는데, 이중 둘은 현장에서 통역을 진행하였고 다섯은 완전 원격통역으로 진행되었다. 사전 조사의 목적은 각 통역 방식의 양상과 특징을 알아보는 것이었고, 조사 결과 이러한 통역 방식의 변화로 인해 특정 형태의 상호교류와 협력 빈도수가 가시적으로 줄어든 것으로 나타났다. 따라서 본고의 목표는 통역사와 통역이라는 직업군에 대한 원격통역의 영향을 새로운 관점에서 살펴봄으로써 통역 연구의 범위를 넓히는 것이라 할 수 있을 것이다.

핵심어: 동시통역(SI), 원격통역, 통역사 상호교류, 통역사 전문직업화, 통역 역사

1. Introduction: Conference Interpreting as a Profession

Conference interpreting is a recent profession and a small one in terms of numbers of practitioners. The International Association of Conference Interpreters was founded in 1953 and has fewer than 3,000 members.

It is widely agreed that a profession can be identified on the basis of certain formal attributes which include such characteristics as codified ethical standards, a professional association, formal training and a distinctive knowledge base (Grbić, 2015, p. 322). In conference interpreting the process of professionalization gained momentum in the 1950s with the founding of the professional association, AIIC, in 1953 and the setting up of numerous training institutions, such as ISIT and ESIT in Paris in 1957, as well as the publication of a number of books by practitioners about interpreting (Herbert, 1952). AIIC in particular was a key factor, exerting considerable influence on the emergence of the profession, as it was an international association of individual members, with a code of ethics as of 1957. AIIC has also been closely involved in professional education through its monitoring of training institutions (Thiéry, 2015, p. 14).

Professionalization is a social process reaching beyond formal characteristics such as those mentioned above. It involves the “development of identities, norms, credentials and values associated with becoming part of a professional group” (Baigorri-Jalón et al., 2022, p. 13). The term “norm” is used here as referring to “values and ideas shared by a community” which translate into a judgment as to what is right or wrong in professional performance and behavior (Garzone, 2015; Toury, 2012). In the case of conference interpreting, self-beliefs and norms are transmitted through AIIC and other professional bodies, through manuals and literature, through training, but also through interpreters’ interaction. All these spaces give rise to a meta-discourse which in turn reinforces self-beliefs and norms (Diriker, 2009, 2004). Arguably, since the introduction of simultaneous interpreting in its modern form, the main theatre of interpreters’ interaction, and hence of professional cohesion, is the time spent together in SI booths.

Today, SI has become almost synonymous with conference interpreting itself. The spread of SI, carried out in booths with interpreting equipment, has accompanied and indeed made possible the emergence of a global multilingual institutional framework. It has also contributed to a large extent to the development of conference interpreting as a profession (Baigorri-Jalón

et al., 2022; Grbić, 2015). Viaggio notes that “in 50 years we have gone a long way to accomplishing what took medicine, for instance, some 25 centuries to achieve: turning into a recognized profession based on a recognized discipline taught at recognized academic institutions” (Viaggio, 2018). The speed of this professionalization process has been driven by simultaneous interpretation and its effects.

2. Greater Distance and Distance Interpreting

In the following we will consider the way in which interpretation and interpreters have been physically distanced from the meeting itself over the years. This has culminated in distance interpreting proper and in some instances fully remote interpreting, with each interpreter working from a separate space. A number of authentic events with interpreting will be examined to identify the consequences of fully remote interpreting on interpreter interaction, as opposed to interaction when at the same location, sharing a booth. For this purpose, and as a preliminary approach to studying this issue, seven meetings have been selected. These are two sets of paired meetings, with one being on remote interpreting mode and one on-site in each pair. They are recurring events, so the meetings themselves are organized by the same body, with similar content, and the languages and number of interpreters are the same. The other three are all in fully remote interpreting mode, the aim being to identify features of interpreter interaction related to this mode of interpreting. For the fully remote interpreting, the interpreters communicated with each other using Whatsapp texting.

2.1. The Distancing of Interpretation and of Interpreters

One of the founding myths of interpreting as a profession is that of a golden era of consecutive interpretation with legendary interpreters, such as the Kaminker brothers who interpreted at the League of Nations. They, like their almost exclusively male colleagues, were highly visible, speaking from the dais, literally in the place of the speaker. They were not trained but were assumed to have “innate” talent and were said to reproduce perfectly even lengthy and complex speeches. The shift to simultaneous was not an easy one, and hostility lingered for some time. Hans Jacob, an honorary President of

AICC, wrote as late as 1962 that SI has “mechanized and depersonalized” the profession (Jacob, 1962).

Statements by interpreters even now are prone to convey a vague nostalgia for the now long-gone consecutive era, with simultaneous perceived as a form of eviction. SI “means that interpreters became invisible, anonymous voices, heard in headsets but rarely seen, relegated to the wings in their glass boxes, instead of being centre stage” (Taylor-Bouladon, 2007, p. 21).

Dam and Gentile, considering the professionalization of conference interpreting following the introduction of simultaneous, note that the second generation of (simultaneous) interpreters were admired for their in-booth skills, but “they did not share the glory of the first generation”, the consecutive interpreters of the inter-war period (Dam & Gentile, 2022, p. 281). An investigation of staff interpreters at the EU found that interpreters, whilst considering their work as key, assessed visibility as low (Dam & Zethsen, 2013).

Yet, in some ways simultaneous gave interpreting a new and different form of visibility, through the technical paraphernalia involved, and, more positively, the greater number of interpreted meetings. Starting with the Nuremberg trials, photos and footage of world leaders wearing headsets have become commonplace, a *trope* of high-level events. Television interpreting, as well as interpreted interviews at sports events, are also commonplace. And interpreters must be one of the very few professions to receive regular applause at the end of the workday, indicating that their work at least is not so very invisible after all.

Thus, SI marked a major and radical shift, the beginning of a long-term trend for interpreters to become more removed physically from the event, as well as introducing a technical mediation between interpreter and delegates. SI “...brought an end to direct incoming and outgoing communication (the mediation of technical devices was necessary) and the physical separation of interpreters from their speakers and users” (Baigorri-Jalón et al., 2022, p. 14).

The process of interpreting is invisibilized, for it can no longer be observed unfolding before the delegates’ eyes. The interpreter is also invisibilized to some extent. The interpreter’s space is separated from the rest of the event. Interpreters are enclosed in their booth, looking out through a pane of glass onto the room, and to the event beyond. Since, Internet has introduced a new form of mediation, as interpreters use laptops, pads and smart phones to access information in the booth, and spend much booth-time looking into a further digitalized space.

There has been, in parallel, a gradual, but undeniable, move to ever greater physical distance of booths and interpreters from the rest of the meeting. The interpreters at Nuremberg were squeezed into the courtroom, in uncomfortable proximity to the other parties, as can be seen in the historical photos of the trial. Their delineated space was small and they were very visible. Early meeting rooms tended to have cramped interpreting booths in the room itself or just behind. As more languages were added (especially at the EU), or as conference centers were redesigned or purpose-built, booth equipment and size improved, but booths became further removed from the meeting rooms. Frequently, speakers and listeners can barely be seen from the interpreting booths in congress halls or conference centers, and interpreters' eyes are often on the in-booth monitor rather than the actual speaker (for an account of this process at the OECD see Donovan, 2017).

Loss of proximity to the meeting is significant for interpreters, not just for practical purposes, such as the ability to obtain documents. Reports by interpreters about their work and much of the literature (usually written by practising interpreters or interpreter trainers) emphasize the importance of visual input. A view of the room, the audience and of the speakers has long been considered essential by interpreters (Bühler, 1985; Moser-Mercer, 2005). The psychological need to feel involved in a meeting is mentioned frequently in discussions about the drawbacks of distance interpreting (see below). Moreover, interpreters assert on the one hand the difficulty of the interpreting process, but on the other the compensation of social esteem and excitement related to proximity with highly visible clients, and the pleasure of being intimately involved in a communication process (Donovan, 2017; Gile, 2004, p. 13; Jones, 2002).

Distance or remote interpreting is yet a further step towards eviction from the meeting room. Experiments with basic forms of remote interpreting in various forms date back to the 1920s. Feasibility studies have been carried out at the United Nations and elsewhere since the 1970s. They were rather inconclusive, but pressures mounted for remote interpreting as of the early 2000s. With new technologies available (monitors, transmission of sound and image) and lower costs, organizers identified the benefits of “distancing” the interpreters. From the organizers' point of view, the advantages are numerous: overcoming lack of space for booths in the meeting room (for instance, at the European Council at Hampton Court in 2005); cost and convenience; security and safety when conferences are held in potentially dangerous venues,

and of course, with Covid, health. Interestingly, one reason given at high-level meetings is the wish for participants to have “privacy”, i.e. to render interpreters completely invisible while benefitting from interpretation.

Remote participation of delegates in meetings had become fairly frequent well before Covid, more so than remote interpreting per se, particularly in institutional settings. Donovan (2010), writing more than a decade ago, discusses at length the need to train students to handle “videoconferencing”, i.e. interpreting of remote participants. The AIIC survey from 2018, based on data from 2017, indicated that many interpreters already had experience with various forms of “distance interpreting” (Seeber & Fox, 2022, pp. 495-496). The figure given for “Video Remote Interpreting” (VRI, which is what is usually meant now by remote interpreting) is that 80% of interpreters polled had done some VRI in the past, even if the number of days was still quite low (AIIC, 2018).

Covid-related restrictions led to a marked acceleration of this trend. In their survey of 946 interpreters in 19 countries, Bujan and Collard (2021) noted that nearly 80% of respondents reported working exclusively on-site for simultaneous interpreting tasks prior to the pandemic; in the post-pandemic world, only 3% of respondents said all their simultaneous interpreting takes place on-site.

The nature of remote also changed. The arrangements prior to the pandemic were predominantly what can be described as “proximity” remote. In other words, interpreters were on the same site as the meeting, but in an adjacent room or space. Thus, for the most part interpreters interpreting “remotely” were located in the same place as boothmates and even the whole team (86% and 72% respectively of those having done VRI replied often or always to this question) (AIIC Taskforce on Distance Interpreting, 2018, p. 21). The meeting itself was also usually conducted on-site in a conventional meeting room.

During Covid measures, this rather gentle version of remote interpreting gave way to more radical forms. The divorce between interpreters and other meeting stakeholders is more marked. Based on the author’s own observations of the interpreting market in Paris over the past two years, there are two frequent options: Interpreters may actually be on-site whilst the meeting as such is remote. This is the case in some international organizations that continue to provide booths and technical support for interpreters even when the actual event is conducted entirely on-line. In this case, interpreters are part of an exclusive group of players, gathered in their usual space but

addressing an empty room, reaching out verbally to the remote participants. Another common option is interpreters working from a “hub”, a separate site equipped with interpreting booths and with technical staff present. The meeting participants may or may not be taking part in the meeting remotely. In both these situations, the interpreters, although physically removed from the actual meeting event, are together, and can continue to interact. For a while during Covid restrictions, single booths were used for health-related reasons. The interpreters each had a separate work-space, either on-site or in a hub, but they could communicate during breaks, and could see each other through side-windows and thus indicate by gesture when to switch turns, for instance, or to convey various emotions.

2.2 The Consequences of Fully Remote Interpreting

These situations described of course change the dynamics of interpreting, but less radically than another configuration, a more extreme form of remote interpreting, that will be designated as “full remote” in the following, when interpreters are interpreting from separate locations—usually their homes, but sometimes a hotel or professional workplace. This step was taken during lockdown when travel and contacts were banned, so that the meeting event fractured completely into its individual components, with all parties, delegates and interpreters working from their own computer screens in separate spaces. Although lockdowns have been lifted, “full remote” continues to be used. It is not clear at this stage whether the trend will continue, ebb or increase, but if it were to develop further, it could well have a decisive impact on professional self-awareness, as interpreters occupy a radically changed, isolated space.

The rise of remote interpretation has already challenged professional beliefs. Claudio Fantinuoli (2018) has described the shift to RSI as a major upheaval, the “third turn” in conference interpreting, after the move from consecutive to simultaneous and then the introduction of Internet. Remote has been overwhelmingly perceived negatively by interpreters. Jones (2002, p. 66) writes: “There is at the least a risk of interpreters feeling alienated from the meeting in such circumstances and finding it difficult or impossible to provide high-quality interpretation.” The term “alienation” has been widely used by other authors (Moser-Mercer, 2005; Mouzourakis, 2006).

Much emphasis has been put on the practical, technical and possibly legal difficulties to which interpreter home-working gives rise. Some of

these issues have been at least partially resolved. Turn-taking is done via text messaging, signals on the online platform, or observing the colleague's microphone status. Interpreters have ensured they have access to stable broadband connexions, suitable hardware and a headset with a built-in microphone. There is always the worry of the neighbour starting up a DIY project, but such instances are fortunately rare. This is not to downplay the additional worry and stress generated by the lone remote interpreting set-up which are very real. And, of course, the huge issue of poor sound quality.

In the following, we will address the consequences of such an interpreting configuration from a different angle—the impact on interpreter teamwork and, beyond that, on professional self-beliefs and cohesion.

3. The Interpreting Team

Whilst simultaneous interpretation distanced interpreters physically, and perhaps psychologically, from the meeting per se, this distancing has gone hand in hand with greater proximity to other interpreters. Whereas consecutive interpreting is/was often done alone, SI is nearly always undertaken with at least one other interpreter, and in multilingual meetings with many more. A full six-language meeting at the United Nations requires 14 interpreters. A 24-language conference at the European Union requires a staggering 72 interpreters.

Since the Nuremberg trials and the introduction of SI at the United Nations, it is usual to do SI from interpreting booths. The interpreters share an enclosed space, or rather series of enclosed spaces, the booths, with their “boothmates”, but also occupy other nearby spaces together with all the interpreters assigned to the meeting—corridors, rest areas—just behind or adjacent to the booths. Interpreters are also recruited for “missions”, in other words to cover meeting events away from their home city. In this case, they will usually spend several days and evenings together, furthering social and professional ties.

SI is truly a joint effort. Clients perceive interpreting as a single service and rarely differentiate between individual interpreters in simultaneous mode. They work together “towards the same goal” (Duflou, 2016) of producing a reliable interpretation of the event. This is particularly evident when they need to take each other “on relay” (when the source language is interpreted into a

target language via the interpretation into a third language). This is often the case in multilingual meetings. Interpreters alternate with their colleague(s) taking turns being on mike every twenty or thirty minutes. Unexpected breaks may disrupt this pattern, as may the use of specific languages. These are issues that need discussion and come under the heading of “turn taking”.

Interpreters work under stressful conditions with little, if any, control over the input. They are required to process at speed in real time for an audience. Unsurprisingly, the self-understanding of many interpreters is that interpreting, being a live performance, shares many features with acting or other performance arts, rather than translation. “Interpreters are like actors, not like translators” (Taylor-Bouladon, 2007, p. 94). “Interpreters are not linguists, they are not experts in languages, they are rather experts in comprehension” (Garcia Landa, Marino, as quoted in Taylor-Bouladon, 2007, p. xvi). Kritsis (2021) describes in some detail the many ways in which interpreting is akin to acting on stage. AIIC writes that “in many respects good interpreting is like acting”, suggesting that interpreters become the speaker’s “alter ego” (AIIC, 1999). This self-perception includes a belief in and discourse about the challenging nature of the interpreting task. It is surely no coincidence that Gile’s efforts model and tightrope hypothesis are so widely quoted in practitioners’ writings (Gile, 1995). “Who are these people who spend their lives engaged in these high-speed gymnastics?” asks Taylor Bouladon with a degree of pride (Taylor-Bouladon, 2007, p. 4). These comments indicate a self-belief of being a very specific and distinct profession, a community united around handling major challenges in real time. These beliefs highlight the ideal of interpreters working together in difficult conditions to produce a good performance.

A number of factors, both related to interpreters’ working conditions, and also to professional beliefs, explain the number, range and diversity of exchanges within the team. Turn taking has already been mentioned, but interaction also encompasses in-booth cooperation, commentary on meeting substance, observations about meeting/speaker difficulty, discussion of professional matters and socializing.

In-booth cooperation is discussed by a range of authors (Chmiel, 2008; Jones, 2002; Rangponsumrit, 2016; Taylor-Bouladon, 2007) and covered in several articles on the AIIC website. It is worth noting the terms used by interpreters themselves. They refer to the “team” to describe a group of interpreters covering a particular meeting event. The colleagues with whom they share a

physical booth are “boothmates”, and the interpreter designated to coordinate with organizers and technicians is the “team leader”. The notion of team and team spirit, including mutual assistance and support, is actively and explicitly defended by AIIC, which admonishes interpreters to “Remember you are part of a team, so be supportive of your colleagues” (AIIC, 2023). And also urges them to: “Offer considerate help to your colleagues, for example by finding a reference in a document or looking up a difficult or obscure term; Tell your colleagues if you’re new, they will be supportive” (AIIC, 2023).

The latter quotation gives a good indication of what is generally meant by teamwork in interpreting. Interpreters share glossaries, note down names and figures for each other. In a survey of in-booth cooperation with 200 respondents, Chmiel noted that most interpreters stay in the booth most of the time when not interpreting. And expectations of the respondents were that the boothmate would assist in a number of ways: finding documents (86%), writing down numbers (81%) and writing down a missing term (74%) (Chmiel, 2008). Rangponsumrit obtains similar results in a survey of interpreters in Thailand, with 72.6% of respondents expecting off-mike colleagues to help with dates, names and numbers, and 81.2% expecting them to continue listening to the speaker and be ready to help out (Rangponsumrit, 2016). This is corroborated by other practitioners, such as Jones who states that “writing down numbers is an area where there can, and should, be real team work in the booth” (Jones, 2002, p. 119). AIIC, in addressing remote interpretation, provides a detailed list of forms of cooperation and communication in the booth. These are, as one would expect, echoing Chmiel’s survey, and other authors—assistance with numbers and names, technical terms, helping the colleague to follow a written text, but with some additions relating to turn-taking and technical assistance, such as making sure the colleague has the right outgoing channel or taking over in the event of a coughing fit (AIIC, 2020). Anyone who has done simultaneous interpreting will readily recognize the various situations described. Kritsis refers to this assistance as “backstage activity” and notes that, “Just as in a theatrical production, interpreters rely on the invaluable assistance not only of light, sound and/or IT technicians, but also of their own peers” (Kritsis, 2021, p. 153). Our observations described below show that this mutual assistance can also take broader and more general forms, with a discussion about the meeting content, about speakers and their background, and about specific concepts or agenda items. Such exchanges take place before and after

meeting sessions, during breaks or amongst interpreters who are “off mike”.

Interaction between interpreters during meetings extends well beyond purely practical matters, such as mutual assistance and discussions about turn taking. Taylor-Bouladon points to the importance of personal contacts between work colleagues, claiming that the interpreter’s team “becomes his/her family for the duration of the conference” (Taylor-Bouladon, 2007, p. 114) and that when away on mission together “a wonderful spirit of comradeship develops” within the team. The importance of collegiality is highlighted by head interpreters (i.e. recruiters). Viaggio (2018) thus claims that when recruiting he looks for “helpfulness towards . . . colleagues” and “a sociable personality” (p. 4). Socializing is a significant feature of interpreter cooperation. The fact that interpreting is still numerically a small profession facilitates this socializing, as most colleagues already know each other from former conferences.

In larger institutions, each booth tends to form a “community of practice” defined by Duflou as a group whose members work towards the same goal while sharing “stories, histories, discourses, concepts, tools, styles, ways of doing things” (Duflou, 2016, p. 16). Common beliefs and norms emerge or are reinforced. Similar patterns would be expected amongst freelance interpreters working together frequently.

In SI interpreters work alongside their peers. Both their boothmates and colleagues in adjacent booths can easily “listen in” by switching to a given language channel. All members of the team can hear and judge the others. Interpreters often feel the need to explain and discuss their interpretation with other members of the team. This makes interpreting an activity that is potentially face-threatening (Diriker, 2004; Monacelli, 2009). Particularly as, if Monacelli is correct, “the ‘being’ of an interpreter and the ‘doing’ of interpreting are inseparable” (Monacelli, 2009, p. 159). Monacelli’s sub-title to her book “surviving the role” is eloquent. Given that the prevailing norm is complete fidelity, failure to render the whole content, and omissions, errors, are embarrassing and potentially damaging to the interpreter’s reputation and career. Explanations, phrased in the form of complaints, can help ease the tension, indicating that the interpreter is aware of any “sub-standard” rendition, that the interpreting is not in compliance with expectations and norms. References to the difficulty of the original material can then be used to justify. These face-saving tactics will often elicit sympathy from other team members who will confirm the difficulty of the original or confess to similar

problems.

The need to analyze and justify performance results, at least in part, from the perceived gap between interpreting norms of accuracy and precision, on the one hand, and interpreting realities, on the other. Diriker has documented the distance between what she refers to as interpreters' "de-contextualized" discourse and "contextualized discourse" (Diriker, 2009, 2004). When describing in theoretical terms the role and responsibilities of interpreters, they emphasize the need for accuracy, refusing to accept that they may add or change in any way the original, but in actual interpreted events, they acknowledge and accept deviations from these norms, revealing more complex behavior than that acknowledged in official de-contextualized discourse (Diriker, 2009). A frequently-quoted example of the latter behaviour is the handling of "untranslatable" jokes, when interpreters sometimes resort to asking the audience to laugh (see also Jones, 2002, pp. 111-112). Thus, Taylor-Bouladon (2007), after asserting that interpreters must interpret figures with absolute accuracy, "figures must be absolutely correct" (p. 66), writes later in her book that "if you have prepared well, studied the subject thoroughly and read about it in the press, you can make an 'educated guess'" (p. 129). A similar mismatch is present in Jones' (2002) handbook. Having stated in the introduction that "The conference interpreter must be able to provide an exact and faithful reproduction of the original speech" (Jones, 2002, p. 4), he later qualifies this statement considerably when asserting that "...the simultaneous interpreter must be prepared to diverge in form, and sometimes in literal content, from the letter of the original, in order to achieve the objectives of a good simultaneous interpretation" (Jones, 2002, p. 125), adding that interpretation must be "audience-specific and situation-specific".

The discrepancy between the two discourses generates tensions that require resolution. Interpreter interaction in the form of exchanges around difficulties and their solution can contribute to alleviating such tension. Discussion of solutions found to overcome interpreting difficulties contributes to determining and refining the accepted standards and practices of interpreting, in authentic working conditions.

4. Consequences for Interpreter Interaction of Remote Working: A Preliminary Investigation

Given the wealth and diversity of interpreter interaction when working together in a team on-site, what are the consequences when interpreters are in separate locations? AIIC explicitly addresses the implications of interpreters working alone in its Covid-19 distance interpreting recommendations, in which it is stated that interpreters “must be able to work with their language team and other language teams seamlessly (e.g. communication, collaboration, turn-taking)” (AIIC, 2020). It is therefore recommended that all interpreters be in the same space. It is stated as a matter of principle “that simultaneous conference interpreting is a team effort” (AIIC, 2020). When interpreters are not sharing a physical space, teamwork has to change and some features of it are likely to be compromised. As noted by Bartłomiejczyk et al., Covid has “considerably disrupted interpreters’ teamwork routines” and teamwork “may be even more difficult to coordinate in remote interpreting” (Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, 2022, p. 23).

4.1 The Material: The Meetings Studied

As indicated above (Section 2), we will consider seven meetings. There are two pairs of events, one with on-site interpreting and the other with fully remote interpreting, as well as three events with fully remote interpreting. The remote interpreting was done via Zoom and the interpreters chose in all cases to communicate through Whatsapp texting. Other platforms and communication options could provide a different environment for interpreter interaction, but the option studied is a frequent configuration, at least on the Paris interpreting market. The first pair of meetings are two events organized by the same body and in the same organization but held two years apart. The first takes place in 2021 in remote mode, with all the interpreters bar one working from home. Most of the delegates are also in remote mode, with a small core team on-site. The second meeting in 2023 is mainly on-site, with a few delegates joining remotely. All the interpreters are on-site. The languages are French, English and German, distributed over two booths—a French-English booth and a German booth interpreting from both French and English. The exchanges discussed here concern only the former.

The second meeting pair are again two conferences organized by the

same body. The first takes place in 2022 on-site with three interpreters sharing a booth at the venue. The second is also on-site, but, due to the room configuration and technical facilities, the interpreters were informed at the last minute that they would have to interpret from home, using the Zoom platform on their computers. Interestingly, the meeting participants never realized that this was the case and the interpreters received a warm round of applause at the end. Participants were surprised to hear that the interpreters were not in the building. The team was made up in both cases of three interpreters, working into French and into English.

Finally, three short meetings will be considered. Typically for the Paris market, they were held with French and English interpreters, with two interpreters working in both directions. They take place in full remote interpreting mode. They took place in early 2023.

The remote interpreting exchanges are documented through the Whatsapp group conversation. The on-site exchanges are based on the author's observations during the meeting. Permission was obtained in writing from the interpreters concerned. No details allowing for identification of the specific meetings or to their content are not provided. Obviously, these seven meetings do not in any way constitute a scientific data base. The inter-meeting and inter-subject variables are numerous and would justify a much larger sample. This study is only intended to open up a possible area of investigation and reflexion about interpreter interaction in different situations, and perhaps beyond to begin a conversation about the future of interpreting as a profession, as remote interpreting becomes more commonplace.

4.2 Preliminary Findings

4.2.1 Meeting Pair One

The first full remote interpreted meeting lasted one and a half day. The interpreters did not engage in any contacts prior to the event itself. They communicated via Whatsapp during the event, with 73 exchanges, most very short. 29 related directly to turn taking, drawing up a table with turn times, handing over the microphone, and so on. 17 related to technical matters—brief sound failures, connecting and the like. Two concerned changes in meeting times. This means fully two-thirds of the messages are purely

practical in nature. Another 13 messages relate to whether and how to obtain one speaker's notes during the meeting, and the advisability of asking the speaker to share his notes. 8 messages are greetings or signings off. One is a joke about a statue wearing a mask, and 3 relate to the ease or difficulty of speakers. Communication focuses primarily on pragmatic issues specific to the meeting itself. The three messages about speakers elicit only a terse reply of one or two words. Socializing, with the exception of one short joke, is perfunctory. None of the messages relates to the meeting content or broader issues. In communication and sociological terms, the text messaging does not seem to function smoothly, given the number of conflicting messages about the speaker's notes, and also the lack of reassurance following expressions of encountering difficulty.

In the corresponding in-booth meeting, the exchanges are more wide-ranging, lengthier and richer. Of course, they cannot be quantified in the same way as the messages. To start with, there are greetings and several exchanges about turn-taking. This is similar to the full remote meeting, but the verbal exchanges are supplemented with facial expressions, body language and physical interactions (kissing, patting, handshaking). Brief comments of speaker difficulty or content, occur almost systematically after every half hour turn between the interpreter who has just finished and the boothmate not on mike. "That was tough", "they are all so fast". The usual response is to agree and provide some input, such as "yes especially the Japanese speaker" or "I had a terrible time with Poland". In so doing, colleagues confirm difficulty, accept and validate any tacit justification for norm infringement and provide reassurance. This mode of interaction proceeds more smoothly here than in the remote exchanges.

Practical matters such as accessing coffee and finding a socket for the phones/computers are also addressed. In-booth assistance is frequent, with colleagues jotting down numbers and also handing over documents, at least once or twice per 30-minute turn. The appointed team leader contacts the technician twice about technical problems encountered by her colleagues.

There is a lengthy conversation at the beginning of the second day about an item on the agenda, relating to a proposal to set up a technical working group. One of the interpreters had researched this thoroughly and shared information with his colleague. The discussion of the background, context and objectives proved very useful subsequently when interpreting this item, as it provided pragmatic and thematic input. There are no examples of such

thematic-related briefing in the remote exchanges.

Another form of discourse specific to the in-booth meeting relates to professional matters. This is entirely absent from the on-line conversation of the first meeting. Three such conversations were noted. The volume of interpreting work with German, considering which organizations still use this language frequently and with examples of colleagues who interpret from German. Secondly, a conversation about teaching interpretation, whether it is enjoyable, and rewarding, including an exchange about the problems of trying to schedule classes during busy periods. This conversation includes also a brief overview of students currently enrolled in one of the interpreting schools in Paris.

Another conversation relates to lifestyle choices as an interpreter. The colleagues talk about the ideal age to retire versus the wish to carry on interpreting. Colleagues are quoted and examples given of recently-retired interpreters.

These three instances are conversations amongst peers between turns or before the meeting starts. They last no more than five minutes, but each conveys valuable information about the profession. The topics obviously reflect the personal interests of the interpreters involved, but the relevant point is that interpreting-related issues of this type are discussed within the team. They help to foster communication in and about the profession, including training issues. They provide information about colleagues, their status and language combination. In this, they contribute to professional cohesion. All the exchanges were conducted in a relaxed and cordial tone, unlike some of the quite sharply-worded text messages during the on-line meeting.

4.2.2 Meeting Pair Two

The second meeting pair concern two one-day meetings organized by the same entity, the first on-site and the second in full remote interpreting mode. The languages in both cases are French and English, with three interpreters, who in both cases know each other fairly well.

There was some exchange amongst the three interpreters prior to the meeting. This was by email and related exclusively to concerns about interpreting this particular meeting in remote mode. During the meeting, Whatsapp is adopted as the mode of exchange in the meeting itself. There are

some 50 exchanges in all. Whatsapp is not used for microphone handover. The messages include greetings and signing off. Initially, there is an exchange about turn length and then sporadically questions about when to take over (after the break, for instance). There are a number of messages about technical problems, not being able to hear well and the image freezing, as well as explanations about the consequences for the interpreting output. This includes one interpreter indicating that she has to stop interpreting owing to poor sound, a complaint about speed and having to stop half way through a read speech. Spontaneous commiseration is given in one case—“you poor thing, have you survived?”. Three comments relate to the meeting being interesting, but very technical, and hence challenging. Worries are expressed about time-keeping in two messages. The tone is warm throughout, especially the final greetings (“great working with you”, “see you soon”). In this example, the range of the messages is broader, and more balanced than in the first remotely interpreted meeting studied above. Although most of the exchanges relate to practical matters (turns in particular), there is more face-saving and tension-relieving interaction. The complaints about technical difficulties, speed and subject matter justify interpreting choices and elicit validation. This works well; spontaneous expressions of sympathy occur in two instances. It should be noted that the references to technical problems are not designed to solve the issues, as the interpreters off-site have no way of doing this and they do not have the technician’s contact details, but rather to explain, as with complaints about speakers, why interpreting is interrupted or incomplete (and thus in violation of standard interpreting quality norms).

The comparable in-booth meeting also involves three interpreters with French and English interpretation and lasts a full day. The conference format and level of difficulty are comparable. The interpreters work from a shared booth, with monitors, in a room adjacent to the actual meeting room. Most participants are on-site, but some intervene remotely, in two cases with pre-recorded video messages. Just as for the off-site interpreting meeting, the commentary on the meeting encompasses references to speed of delivery, and complex content, but also relates frequently to the content presented, the subject matter more broadly and speaker background. Turn taking is discussed, to reach an agreement on the order of turns at the beginning, then to adjust for breaks and for specific speakers. Unlike for the fully remote event, gestures and eye contact are used to indicate readiness to take over the microphone.

The interpreter interaction is richer in content and more varied than for the remote interpretation. The interpreters socialize during coffee breaks and have lunch together. There are several conversations, nearly all related to the meeting itself or to the broader interpreting profession. They include a commentary between two interpreters about the excellent interpretation of the third, a discussion about the future of the profession and a number of references to training matters. Another significant difference with the full remote meeting is the frequent recourse to mutual assistance—jotting down figures and names, reminding the colleague to switch on the microphone, help in obtaining a document.

These two examples of meeting pairs, one with on-site interpreting and one with home interpreting highlight some significant differences between the two configurations in terms of interpreter interaction. Turn taking figures large in interpreter communications in both situations. However, mutual assistance is severely restricted during the meeting itself in the remote situation, as would be expected for practical reasons. Commentary on speaker difficulty, accents, speed and content is thinner and more limited in the off-site interpreting situation. And in the remote configuration, there is almost no discussion of the content of meetings. However, perhaps the most striking difference is the absence of conversations about the world of interpreting.

4.2.3 Three remotely interpreted meetings

The third on-line meeting is of interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, the two interpreters were interpreting from different continents and, unlike in the previous examples, did not know each other, even by name. Secondly, this was a pro bono assignment for a charitable association. The languages are French and English. The meeting was preceded by a brief phone call, made about an hour before the meeting. The interpreter more experienced with the subject matter offered to make a glossary available—which he did via email—and to warn that sound quality was likely to be bad. During the meeting, the interpreters communicate via Whatsapp exclusively, with 35 messages over the course of the two-hour meeting, many just one word “ready”. Nearly all exchanges relate to purely practical matters, essentially turn taking—23 messages. There is one comment on poor sound quality, and three relate to the possibility of Spanish being used. Interestingly, the turn-taking messages include a short video of one of the interpreters flipping a coin to

see who will start. This is an interesting use of messaging and a way for the two interpreters to get to “meet” remotely. Six messages involve greetings and signing off. The tone of these is cordial. For instance, in signing off both interpreters write “nice working with you” and “have a great evening”.

It would seem that in this instance, given that unusually the interpreters do not know each other, they both try to communicate in a warm way. The innovative use of the coin-tossing video is of interest. The prior phone call is intended to build cooperation. However, the in-meeting exchanges are restricted by the medium of on-line messaging and the fact that assistance cannot be offered very readily. As a result, 23 of the 33 messages relate to turns, and are often just one or two words in length (“go” or “ready”).

Two further examples of fully remote interpreted meetings will be considered in the following. In both cases, the meeting is short—just two hours, the languages are French and English and there are just two interpreters. The two colleagues know each other fairly well, having worked together at least a dozen times previously.

In the first case, the Whatsapp conversation included the two interpreters as well as the meeting technician. It involves just 13 messages. A distinctive feature is that the three greetings all include emojis (OK sign, thumbs up sign and winking face). A request is made for assistance over a technical term—“What do you understand by relieving entity”? Reply “no idea. Said it in English. Linguee no help”. Subsequently, this interpreter offers to send a glossary. Therefore, it can be considered that these three messages constitute a form of mutual assistance, albeit not very successful.

There is a single message referring to turn taking. Otherwise, mike handover is done via the zoom microphone function. The final messages relate the meeting length and difficulty, and are expressed in mutual commiseration mode—“That was short but not sweet”. The technician apologises for poor sound and explains that he has limited influence over speakers, to which one of the interpreters responds with a “surprising given they are supposed to be IT experts”, thus expressing sympathy by sharing in the technician’s sense of frustration. Both interpreters then thank the technician. Again, exchanges are limited in both number and range. However, there is an attempt to seek—and provide—assistance. Interestingly, the technician and the interpreters engage in a similar pattern of recognition of non-norm compliant service, followed by expression of sympathy and hence validation, as do interpreters amongst themselves.

The final meeting leads to only very limited exchange, just 10 Whatsapp messages over nearly two hours. However, the interpreters were able to greet each other and the technician when first connecting up with the platform and before being allocated to the virtual interpreting booth, so the usual greetings are absent from the Whatsapp conversation. Turn-taking during the meeting is done via observing Zoom microphone. The seven first messages relate to deciding who will start and the length of turns. The final three which occur after the end of the meeting relate to mutual commiseration, with complaints about sound. This meeting is the only instance where the interpreters do not use the messaging service to greet and to sign off. Reading back through the conversation, this feels impolite and abrupt. However, this was not the impression at the time, no doubt owing to the direct on-line exchange at the outset.

5. Conclusions

As would be expected, inter-interpreter exchanges in full remote mode are mostly very short, the longest in our sample is no more than 200 words. The majority are made up of half a dozen words or fewer. They relate overwhelmingly to practical matters, in particular turn-taking, changes in schedule and meeting times. Mutual assistance, as defined by AIIC and practitioners in the form of providing numbers, names, technical terms, and so on, is almost entirely absent. The interpreters only rarely listen to each other and have few tools to assist each other. Some supportive messages are noted in all the remote meetings, but they are few in number. They take the form of complaints and commiseration regarding speaker difficulty—speed, accents, contents—and poor sound quality. There are also a number of purely social messages—greetings, wishing a pleasant evening or weekend. In some cases, interpreters do telephone each other at the end of a remote meeting to debrief, but this did not occur in the examples studied and does not seem to be frequent. There were however some contacts prior to two of the fully remote meetings, but again of a practical nature. Many facets of interpreter communication were almost entirely absent from the remote interpreting exchanges. And they were limited by the messaging tool chosen. Interestingly, the interpreters did not resort to more sophisticated modes of communication, such as setting up a parallel on-line video meeting amongst

themselves to enrich exchanges and allow for more cooperation.

The on-site interpreted meetings in the study present much broader-ranging, richer, and lengthier inter-interpreter communications. There provide many opportunities for discussion before the meeting, during breaks and at the end, and even during the meeting itself, as in both cases there are three interpreters. There are also many cases of mutual assistance, particularly noting numbers and, to a lesser extent, technical terms, as well as indicating places in the documents that are being referred to or quoted, finding documents, and contacting the technician to solve technical issues. On-site interpreting interaction also includes full conversations of varying length and complexity. Some are purely social, with questions about colleagues' health, children and holidays. But most relate either to the meeting itself, with comments, views, or information about the participants and subject matter; or more broadly to the profession, as shown in some detail in the first example.

The sample is much too small to draw any hard and fast conclusions. The preliminary findings serve mainly to confirm common-sense assumptions. However, it is interesting to note the degree to which on-site interpreter interaction provides a platform for interpreters to have conversations that further their knowledge of the profession and of colleagues, deepen their understanding of conference subject matter, and forge and refine shared norms and beliefs. The booth can also be seen as a space of exclusive socialization in which interpreters cultivate their own analysis of the event in a parallel meta-discourse to the actual meeting. The exchanges are determined by a number of factors, many relating to individual affinities and specificities, but others are both shaped by, and in turn help to shape, widespread shared beliefs about the profession, as well as conventions and norms. This category of exchanges is almost entirely absent from the fully remotely interpreted meetings.

Personality and specific circumstances must clearly have a major impact on communication between interpreters, and this sample is too small to offset such variability. However, if these findings are confirmed on the basis of further research, the conclusion may well be that growing recourse to interpreting in a fully remote mode could weaken professional cohesion. It could also lead to a more limited understanding by interpreters of meeting content and pragmatics, and therefore to a more superficial interpretation, as full remote provides little opportunity to share background knowledge. On

a more positive note, interpreters may well adjust to full remote by making greater use of video calls, or setting up a separate Zoom meeting, so as to enhance communication.

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Professional Profile

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