Interpreting 2.0

Technology is evolving rapidly. Let’s break it down into a few general categories to better grasp how innovations are affecting interpreters.

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Earlier this year, I was asked by the US National Association of Judiciary interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) to tackle the topic of emerging technologies and their possible effects on interpreting. Given the often breakneck speed of technological innovation, that original blog post is already due for an upgrade of its own as the tech landscape continues to evolve rapidly. So here’s an update, this time focused on conference interpreting.

First of all, it bears repeating that the word “technology” means different things to different people. But when it comes to conference interpreters in today’s environment, technology still conjures up all sorts of largely unfounded fear and denial. Some secretly wonder: “Will I be replaced by a computer?” while others dismiss the possibility altogether by saying: “Oh, a computer can’t do what I do, it’s just not possible!” In a world increasingly shaped by technological innovation, neither of these approaches is constructive or helpful. So, in an effort to allay some of the fears about technology, but more importantly to encourage my fellow conference interpreters to embrace it, let me break technology into three distinct categories:

- technologies for the delivery of interpreting services
- technologies that augment an interpreter’s performance
- technologies designed to replace human interpreters altogether

In today’s sensationalized media the latter category garners most, if not all, of the attention, and is the source of most interpreters’ misgivings. But I believe that we should be focusing on the first two, which is where the truly significant breakthroughs for our profession are and will continue to be found.

Technologies for the delivery of interpreting services

Large-scale simultaneous interpreting (anything beyond chuchotage) has been dependent on some form of technology since its short-lived debut in the early 20th century at the ILO and the League of Nations. Conference interpreting in the 21st century is only becoming more technology dependent, as human interaction continues to expand beyond the four walls of the traditional conference room.

Over the last 20 years, there has been an explosion of potential platforms for delivering interpreting services. While most of these technologies have not been used in the conference interpreting space, over-the-phone interpreting (OTP), video relay service (VRS) and video relay interpreting (VRI) are well established. More recently, technophile interpreters have been finding ways to use existing
consumer-grade services. Many are currently free or low cost, like Skype and Google Hangouts, while others offer a monthly fee-based subscription service, like Adobe Connect, WebEx or GoToMeeting. These platforms are being used to provide remote consecutive interpreting services to direct clients. However, none of these Internet-based collaboration platforms have appropriately addressed the basic infrastructure requirements for using their systems to provide simultaneous interpretation… at least not yet.

In an effort to fill that void, enterprising language service providers (LSPs) and interpreters have been blazing a trail by creating hodgepodge ad hoc solutions that make it possible to provide simultaneous interpreting for telephone calls, webinars and on-line meetings using services like those mentioned above in combination with landlines and cell phones. The set-ups are far from perfect, as interpreters who have worked in this way can attest. However, the law of supply and demand is clearly at work, and it is only a matter of time until someone finally gets the technology right. As I watch these developments, I am reminded of the words of technologist and author Michael Saylor: “Technology fails until it succeeds.” Conference interpreters would do well to keep an eye on these developments.

Some international and multilateral organizations have implemented high-quality systems for remote interpreting, remote participation and multilingual webstreaming. However most of these solutions have been custom built to exact specifications within closed systems and usually at great cost, making them difficult to replicate and scale for use on the broader interpreting market. One interesting exception is a multilingual remote participation system implemented in 2011 by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

There are many projects out there, some that have taken the time and effort to consult with working interpreters and end users of interpreting services, but far more that have not. However, given the number of on-line meetings taking place and the increased level of interaction between countries and cultures, there is tremendous growth potential for on-line multilingual meetings. To be successful, in addition to the appropriate technological platforms, these meeting will need competent, professional simultaneous interpreters, just as face-to-face meetings require today.

Technologies that augment an interpreter’s performance

Another area where conference interpreters are benefitting from technology is in their individual performance and continuing education. Laptop and tablet computers, webinar platforms, databases and search engines, parallel corpora, and yes, even Google Translate are improving the quality of our work and the availability of interpreter training and education.

The days of interpreters lugging around printed dictionaries have long since passed, and as electronic documents become the norm in most venues where conference interpreters work, we will become more adept at handling large amounts of electronic information. The transition is not without its difficulties, but conference interpreters who “go electronic” will gain a competitive advantage over those who do not.

As an example, at a recent meeting, a tech-savvy colleague of mine was able use his tablet computer to snap a high-resolution photo of an important document that a speaker had shared with him shortly before speaking. With the speaker’s permission, my colleague was able to e-mail the document’s image to the rest of the team. No photocopies necessary, and the whole process took less than a minute.

In the last two years, on-line training and education offerings for interpreters have mushroomed. Professional associations (including AIIC), private sector companies and even individual trainers are making it more convenient than ever to hone skills and stay current. Language maintenance, once a
serious challenge, is easier than ever before. Technology gives us every opportunity to improve professionally, but it is up to us as individuals to apply it wisely.

The opportunities of technology for interpreter training have not been lost on large institutional users of interpreting services. In this area, Europe has taken the lead. Efforts by the European Commission and the European Parliament to make interpreting expertise available through virtual learning sessions with training programs across Europe have set the standard for similar endeavors around the world. Two other projects worthy of note in this area include the University of Geneva’s Virtual Institute and the Online Resources for Conference Interpreter Training (ORCIT) project.

Finally, the Internet and social technologies provide interpreters with an unprecedented opportunity to market themselves and build a direct client base. However, this is a subject for an entirely separate article.

Technologies designed to replace human interpreters altogether

The financial and logistic incentives for creating a fully automated accurate machine interpreting system are enormous, and advances in statistical machine translation (SMT) have reinvigorated the search for this linguistic Holy Grail. In the last few years the private market has seen multiple offerings of purported “automatic translators” for smart phones, many of which disappeared just as quickly as they were introduced. Even so, the search continues, and apps like Google Translate and AT&T Translator are finding their way to more and more smart phones. Other services, like Lexifone, Jibbigo and NTT DoCoMo’s Translator Phone, purport to turn any phone into a consecutive interpreter, often with nonsensical results.

The US Defense Department has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on machine translation and interpretation research that has led to the creation of gadgets such as the Phraselator and IraqComm as well as programs like TransTac and BOLT. As has been the case for decades, we can expect more innovations from the military. The US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) has been enlisted to evaluate these technologies. A short video about how they do it can be watched here.

Interpreters should view these innovations with interest, not trepidation. Conference interpreters, in particular, have little to fear from these inventions, as they seek to provide communication in venues and settings where conference interpreters seldom, if ever, work. I recommend a recent Slate article, Why Computers Still Can’t Translate Languages Automatically, to get a good overview as to why human interpreters should not worry about being replaced in the foreseeable future. As American author, inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil put it, the actual translation and interpreting tasks performed by humans may evolve, but the demand for language services as a whole will only grow. [ii]

The bottom line

As a conference interpreter, if you want to expand your client base and remain relevant in a growing and changing linguistic services market, you can’t turn a blind eye to innovation. So the next time you come across a new technology that could have an effect on interpreting, ask yourself: “In which of these three groups does it belong?” The answer may not only calm your fears but might just turn you into a technology enthusiast, or even better, help boost your performance, your productivity and maybe even your bottom line.
[i] Full disclosure: I am General Manager of multilingual operations at ZipDX, the company that provides the cloud-based audio solution for the remote participation system at the ITU mentioned here.


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