Interpreters versus technology - Reflections on a difficult relationship: Part 1

Can interpreters, individually and collectively, find the right balance of skepticism and enthusiasm when dealing with new technologies?

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Interpreting is caught in tsunami currents of technological and social change that are sweeping away whole industries in a matter of years and replacing them with structures never before seen in human history. [i]

What Katherine Allen describes above can be summarized using just one word: disruption. And massive disruption is what interpreters currently face, albeit not for the first time. A radical step is upon us: the general rollout of information and communication technology in the field of conference interpreting (Berber, 2008, p.5). In analogy to the paradigm shifts described in Vladimir Kutz’s competence model of interpreting studies (Kutz, 2003), I would call this the “technological paradigm shift”. To be able to cope with these impending challenges, interpreters must be introduced to new technologies during training. As Donald Kiraly puts it: "An important part of the education of any professional must entail practical training in learning how to use the everyday tools of the profession.” [ii][iii]

This piece looks at some of the many shifts and changes in the interpreter’s profession. Part 2 will make suggestions as to how interpreter training can adapt. Saying that today’s students bring a lot of curiosity and skills to the table when starting their studies is stating the obvious. We do not need blind euphoria, but rather a reasonable and critical curiosity. Curiosity, after all, is one of the character traits of a good interpreter.

The past: The Nuremberg Trials

Simultaneous interpretation (SI) is the most recent form of interpreting, which is considered the second-oldest profession in the world. SI was only made possible by progress in conference technology. It is fair to say that the conference interpreting profession is closely linked to technology. And the War Tribunal in Nuremberg after WWII is considered the breakthrough event for modern SI. (I say “modern SI” because “chuchotage” as a low-tech form of simultaneous has been around forever.)

SI was not, however, invented for dealing with Nazi crimes at the Nuremberg trials. Decades before,
the League of Nations in Geneva had already looked into alternatives to time-consuming consecutive interpretation, which had always been part and parcel of international diplomacy. Edward Filene, an American businessman, played a key part in this quest. As an ardent supporter of the League of Nations and as a participant in meetings of the International Labour Conference, he knew how complicated things could get with consecutive and submitted a proposal in 1925. Filene envisaged a simple interpreting booth with a high-quality microphone that would be connected – via an amplifier – to the earphones worn by delegates in the room. Oral contributions would have to be translated beforehand and then read out by the interpreter while the delegate gave his speech. Since Filene was not a technical expert, he enlisted the help of the British electrical engineer Gordon Finley, who cobbled together a first prototype using telephone components. IBM eventually took over the “Filene-Finley System” and developed it further. IBM’s “Hushaphone” was used successfully at both the League of Nations and the United Nations (cf. UN Resolution 152). Later on, the French military officer Léon Dostert (Eisenhower’s personal interpreter) was tasked with solving the language issue at the Nuremberg trials and picked the IBM system (Moggio-Ortiz, 2008).

Now try, just for a second, to imagine what it must have been like for those brave interpreters recruited to work in the Nuremberg Palace of Justice. Many of them had no formal training as interpreters (which was the rule back then, and not the exception) and mastered several languages because of their life circumstances. Try to imagine having to interpret one of the darkest chapters of world history with mostly untested equipment for months on end with no special training whatsoever. (Some of the Nuremberg interpreters had experienced persecution first-hand because they were Jews or refugees.) Consecutive was the established standard and many of the more conservative interpreters were rather skeptical. They feared a loss of quality and went as far as belittling their progressive colleagues as “telephonists” (Moggio-Ortiz, 2008). And indeed, the working conditions were anything but ideal. Interpreters did not sit in a closed-off booth, but rather, in groups of three, behind a simple glass panel with absolutely no sound insulation. They had to put up with bad earphones and had to share a single microphone. The system often provided only poor sound quality or broke down completely. On top of that, “monitors” were hovering over them, listening to the interpretation and even correcting it occasionally. A second team was always on stand-by in an adjacent room, following the proceedings through loudspeakers (Vander Elst, 2002).

The present: Remote interpreting

In a way, history is about to repeat itself. In recent years, remote interpreting has become more and more prevalent. In this form of interpreting, speakers and interpreters are not in the same room. Audio and video are transmitted over short or even long distances. Remote is gaining ground in both the private and institutional interpretation sectors. While the European Parliament and the European Commission have done ground-breaking work with comprehensive tests under scientific oversight using custom technological set-ups, the private market uses mainly existing solutions for phone or video conferencing, even Skype. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity so far to gain personal experience with the system used in the European institutions. However, I have talked to many colleagues who have (remote interpreting teams are put together from a pool of volunteers). As pointed out in relevant literature (Moser-Mercer, 2005; Mouzourakis, 2003), remote interpreting has inherent disadvantages. Interpreters are no longer an integral part of the proceedings, they get tired more quickly and suffer from a higher level of stress, both physically and mentally. They can no longer decide on their visual input.

Be that as it may, I shall not discuss remote interpreting itself in this piece but rather how interpreters deal with this challenge. The very first time remote was used in the European Institutions was the November 2003 Parliament plenary in Strasbourg. The languages of the candidate countries were used, but had to be implemented via remote because of lack of space. The “big bang” for
remote, however, would probably be 27 October 2005, when the British EU presidency held a summit meeting at Hampton Court Palace. The venue is of historical significance and provides only limited space, which is why the decision was taken to relocate the interpreting booths and the interpreters. Extensive technical preparations were necessary and long negotiations with interpreter representatives ensued. Today, the institutions have a common agreement on remote interpreting. Due to its strictness and level of detail, remote was rarely used in the past. That changed in 2011 when the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers requested a limited exception to the agreement for working dinners of the heads of state and government (Vereycken, 2012). This exception was the subject of heated debates among EU interpreters, who were afraid that quality would suffer and that they would be removed from the actual meetings for good. After a few “remote working dinners”, both interpreters and customers evaluated the outcome: while some interpreters were critical, customers were found to be speaking more languages than usual. Several improvements are currently being implemented – which could mean that remote interpreting may become more of a standard practice in the future.

My intention is not to generate blind euphoria. I continue to believe that the disadvantages of remote interpreting must be pointed out, researched and, if possible, removed. But in my opinion, the tipping point for remote interpreting is not far away. When that day comes, many questions will pop up: Will interpreters swap the booth for their home office, working exclusively from the comfort of their own home? How will they deal with being physically separated from the meeting venue, and with possible problems caused by a lack of lip synchronicity or other technical glitches? Are we ready to have our visual input managed by technicians? Some of these questions touch on the very foundations of our profession in much the same way simultaneous interpreting did when it came up decades ago. Former AIIC honorary president Hans Jacob bemoaned in 1962 that the widespread adoption of SI had “de-personalised and mechanised” the interpreter’s profession (AIIC Private Market Sector Standing Committee, 2011). Skeptics may say the same thing about remote interpretation today. But if you ask me, remote is here to stay and will gain ground as economic and ecological needs grow in importance.

Technology has already disrupted many industries and will continue to do so. We have no reason to believe that our profession will be the exception to the rule. I am convinced that we have to maintain a sensible and critical approach towards these developments. But we can only do that if we are well-prepared and have developed a degree of expertise in the technology that we can apply specifically to its effects on our profession. “Understand the wave, and you can ride it. Refuse to adjust, and you will be swallowed,” [iii] as Michael Saylor put it.

Are we ready to “ride the wave”? After WWII, a group of bold and courageous interpreters was willing to ride the wave called simultaneous interpretation at the Nuremberg trials, some of them without any significant preparation. Today, interpreter training is much more formalized and has developed strong institutions. But my impression is that curious and courageous interpreters are still a minority. This minority must become a majority!

In Part 2 (to appear soon on the AIIC blog) we'll examine how training can help narrow the gap between the students' skill set and the technology literacy required to be a conference interpreter today.

References


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