

# The Place of the Interpreter and interpreting in an Institutional Setting

## *El lugar del intérprete y de la interpretación en un entorno institucional*

**Clare DONOVAN**

*ESIT and OECD*

*This article is written in a personal capacity and does not reflect the views of the OECD  
or the OECD member countries.*

Recibido: 15-6-2017. Revisado: 1-9-2017. Aceptado: 15-10-2017.

**Abstract:** Conference interpreting remains a relevant part of the global institutional framework the foundations of which were laid down in the post-War period. However, the context in which it takes place has changed in many ways, as have the practical organization of meetings and the place of the interpreter. The generalization of simultaneous interpreting marked the beginning of new trends towards a spatial displacement of interpreters from the physical core of the meeting, as well as a compression of meeting content. These changes have intensified and accelerated with remote participation. They are analyzed from the perspective of the OECD, a Paris-based multilateral organization. Change is exerting greater pressure on interpreters. To maintain their relevance, they will need to draw on the new communication resources and on information technology.

**Key words:** conference interpreting; consecutive interpreting; simultaneous interpreting; history of interpreting; machine interpreting; remote participation.

**Resumen:** La interpretación de conferencia mantiene su relevancia en el marco institucional cuyas bases fueron sentadas durante la posguerra. No obstante, el contexto en el que se desenvuelve la interpretación ha cambiado en numerosos aspectos. La generalización de la interpretación simultánea marcó el inicio de nuevas tendencias hacia el desplazamiento espacial de los intérpretes y, hoy en día, el distanciamiento de otros participantes del lugar físico de la reunión, así como la compresión del contenido de las reuniones. Dichos cambios se han intensificado y acelerado con la participación a distancia. Se analizarán estos aspectos desde la perspectiva de la OCDE, organización multilateral con sede en París. Al parecer, los cambios están ejerciendo una gran presión sobre los intérpretes. Se argumentará que, para mantener su pertinencia, los intérpretes han de aprovechar los nuevos recursos que ofrecen las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación.

**Palabras clave:** interpretación de conferencia; interpretación simultánea; historia de la interpretación; interpretación automática; participación a distancia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETING – THE INVISIBLE VOICE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and particularly the end of the Second World War, there has been a surge in the number of international bodies. The number of intergovernmental organisations increased from 37 in 1909 to more than 300 eighty years later (Joscelyne 2000). The number of international non-governmental organisations expanded even faster. These new legal entities mostly opted for what Cronin describes as a «foundational multilinguality» (Cronin 2003, 61) in that they have chosen two and, more usually, several official languages, the most extreme case being the European Union Institutions which have enshrined all members' official national languages as official EU languages.

### 1.1. *The Institutional framework and conference interpreting*

This article will discuss conference interpreting, with a focus on the OECD. It is hoped that the trends and situations described will be found to be of general relevance.

Interpreting tends to be defined mainly according to the setting in which it takes place. Thus, the Routledge Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies describes conference interpreting as follows «the rendering of speeches delivered in one language into another at formal and informal conferences and in conference-like settings» (Pöchhacker 2015, 78). The Encyclopedia gives a number of examples, including formal meetings in multilateral organizations. Conference interpreting benefits from the prestigious and

formal nature of the settings in which it takes place. It is better organized as a profession and commands better working conditions than other forms of interpreting.

Conference interpreting is woven into the institutions and structures of the globalized world. As international meetings have multiplied, it has become more commonplace. Most experts or high-ranking government officials who attend multilateral or international conferences will have listened to a speaker through the headset, hearing the interpreter's voice and understanding the speaker's meaning through interpretation. When they speak, they entrust their message to interpreters. When other participants react, nodding, smiling, frowning, taking decisions, they are often responding to a message mediated through the interpreters. Much of this process goes unnoticed unless a speaker chooses to comment on or refer to interpreting, often as a rhetorical device, as when drawing attention to a clever pun or joke «which may be a problem for interpreters».

## 1.2. Conference Interpreting at the OECD

The OECD was set up in 1960 to pursue on a more global stage the work of coordination undertaken by the OEEC (Organization for European Economic Cooperation) which had been founded in 1948 to run the US-funded Marshall Plan. The organization is thus very much part of the post-War global institutional framework. Its role has changed over the decades, following the geo-political transformations of the world around it. Inevitably, it has changed in keeping with wider transformations in the world's economy and in society.

It has absorbed new member countries from Asia and then from the former Eastern Block. Where it once channeled Marshall Aid and coordinated policies with a view to shaping Western Europe as a space of democracy and market economy, it has become a norm-setting body for the globalized world.

The OECD is one of a number of organizations that opted for a pared-down multilingualism, with just two official languages – English and French. These were the languages of early twentieth century diplomacy and also those of the victors of World War II.

French-English interpreting is routinely provided at the OECD at high-level events, such as the Forums it holds on a range of subjects, such as taxation or development issues. These are platforms for discussion with a wide range of participants. The format includes keynote speakers, panels, and question and answer sessions. French-English interpreting is also provided at the committee meetings. Committees bring together government representatives of member and observer countries to discuss the analysis and reports compiled by the secretariat and to take decisions, for instance on work plans.

The OECD website contains several references to interpreting and the competencies it expects of its interpreters. These include «perfect knowledge of the English and French language and culture», but also «professional integrity», covering confidentiality, discretion, accuracy, as well as an understanding of the OECD's international and institutional context. Thus, expectations encompass not only language skills and interpreting expertise, but also high standards of behavior and extensive background knowledge.

## 2. SOME THINGS STAY THE SAME, SOME CHANGE

Perhaps the most surprising thing about conference interpreting is how little it has changed over the last 60 years. Interpreting is still a regular feature of international and multi-lateral organizations. For a long time it seemed as if a wave of English would sweep all before it, as participants from numerous countries sought a lingua franca. It was believed that the linguistic common denominator would be increasingly a form of simplified conference English. Domination of the English language was in the 1990s and early 2000s seen as a major threat to the very future of interpreting. However, although English often dominates in conferences, language retains traction as a political symbol and a signifier of identity. Also, new language constituencies have emerged (Donovan 2009).

### 2.1. *Things that have stayed the same*

At the OECD the number of staff interpreters is almost exactly the same today as at the then OEEC in the late 1940s –15 today, 14 then. As we have seen, French and English have been maintained as the two official languages. They continue to be used systematically in committees and many other OECD meetings. Interpreting is still provided by human interpreters and not by machines or a combination of human and machine. The meeting rooms themselves do not look fundamentally different– more streamlined in the modern style, of course, but still fitted out with all the recognizable features of horseshoe shaped table, country nameplates, the chair's seat at the top table, sometimes even complete with a little wooden gavel for calling the meeting to order.

The definition of the interpreter's role is also largely intact. As in many organizations translators and interpreters still have separate functions and their paths cross only rarely. Interpreters are expected to cover any meeting to which they are assigned, and are therefore required to have extensive knowledge about the organization and the context in which it works. The OECD Intranet site stresses this: «Interpreters [...] are

often seen solely as linguists. In reality, languages are simply tools serving an array of skills including perfect familiarity with specific techniques and an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter addressed». Most interestingly, the description adds that interpreting is «closer in essence to substantive analysis than linguistics».

Interpreting is still viewed as a highly-skilled profession, based on the mastery of specific proficiency in interpreting itself and intimate understanding of subject matter. In this respect, it is interesting to note that, despite the recognition of the importance of background knowledge, they are still part of a separate, specialized Division, rather than being integrated into different Directorates dealing with substance.

## 2.2. Things that have changed

But look a little closer and changes start to emerge. The most striking of these is the switch from consecutive interpreting (CI) to simultaneous interpreting (SI). In CI the interpreter is in the room with the participants. S/he takes notes during the speeches and then renders the message in the other language once the speaker has finished part or the whole of his intervention. In SI interpreters are in booths and interpret at the same time as the speaker delivers the speech. They listen to the speaker through a headset and speak into a microphone.

SI now represents the vast majority of the workload at the OECD as elsewhere. At the OECD requests for interpreting are made through an on-line application. SI is the default mode. If a client committee or directorate wishes to have CI, they need to specify this. In fact, in such cases they often need to clarify their request with the Interpretation Division, as this mode, being used so rarely, is not clearly understood. CI is requested only for about 20 sessions a year, out of 5500 – a session lasting approximately a half day.

Another change that would strike participants from 50 years ago is the presence of screens. These are often placed in the middle of the typical horseshoe-shaped conference table or on the wall behind the top table. They display presentations, the meeting agenda or show the faces of people participating from a distant location via video-conferencing. Words are constantly backed up by images.

There is always an array of electronic devices –tablets, smart phones, laptop computers– scattered amongst the paper documents and the microphones around the conference table. These devices may assist in meeting participation, but they also keep participants connected with the world outside the meeting room, blurring the limits between the two.

In addition, the pace and tone of meetings have evolved. Meetings have become more densely packed and faster. Recommendations from the 1970s and 1980s about the rate of delivery compatible with interpretation now seem very unrealistic.

The number of countries represented at the OECD, as in many other organizations, has increased. Many countries from other continents have joined, including Korea and Chile. In 1948 the then OEEC had 17 member countries, all from Western Europe with the exception of Turkey. The OECD now has 35 member countries and many more are regular observers or signatories to certain agreements. As a result, there are more requests for interpreting in languages other than French and English. «Third languages», as they are known, represented 15% of the total demand for interpreting in 2016, with a trend towards increasing diversification. Interpreting was requested in 15 different languages in 2016, including Indonesian, Arabic and Chinese, reflecting new partnerships and outreach. In the 1960s and 1970s Italian and German used to predominate, but the most frequently used third languages now are Spanish and Russian.

In the following we will consider these changes and their implications for interpreters. We will try to identify likely further developments.

### 3. THE TRIUMPH OF SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING

#### 3.1. *The emergence of simultaneous interpreting*

Simultaneous interpreting has become almost synonymous with conference interpreting. Its spread has accompanied the development of the global institutional framework. Without SI it would be hard to organize the numerous meetings, technical and political, that take place every day in more than two or more languages.

The emergence of SI is associated with the Nuremberg trials. Actually, the ILO had tried out SI at its Conferences from the late 1920s, but Nuremberg was certainly a crucial showcase for the technique, demonstrating its viability in a multilingual setting. The world that emerged from the ashes of the Second World War was anxious to cooperate so as to avoid a new conflict. This required discussions and exchange. It was also more multilingual than pre-war diplomacy which had been conducted mainly in French and English. The adoption of five (and subsequently six) languages at meetings of the UN made SI a necessity (Keiser 2004; Baigorri Jalón 2014).

In multilateral organizations SI triumphed fairly quickly, taking over from CI within a decade. This coincided with the emergence of interpreting as a self-managed profession with its own training and professional associations, most notably the founding in 1953 of the still-influential AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence).

### 3.2. The role of consecutive interpreting

The introduction of SI marked the decline, although not the disappearance, of CI. The transition was bitterly resisted by many of the older consecutive interpreters who predicted an inevitable deterioration in quality. In a memo in 1930 the much-respected consecutive interpreter, Georges Mathieu, explained his objections to the new technique which he saw as ultimately negative for communication in meetings (Baigorri Jalón 2011).

There is little evidence to show that SI is objectively of poorer quality. A study by Gile actually rated simultaneous as more accurate than consecutive, with the author concluding that the claim about the greater fidelity of consecutive «deserves to be seriously challenged» (Gile 2001, 16). The hostility to change is however understandable, for the shift led to –or at least coincided with– a loss of visibility and prestige for interpreters. Until then, interpreters spoke in the room after the speaker from the same dais. They were, according to many accounts, admired and respected, although one cannot help wonder whether delegates did not find the complete re-enactment of the original somewhat tedious. Hostility to SI lingered for some time. Hans Jacob, an honorary President of AIIC, wrote as late as 1962 that SI had «mechanized and depersonalized» the profession<sup>1</sup>.

Most interpreter training institutions still teach CI, some for several months. Some, such as ESIT and ISIT in Paris, require students to attain near-professional proficiency in CI before beginning SI. CI is seen as a foundation for good interpreting technique. It is also still practiced widely in other forms of interpreting than conference interpreting, particularly in court or public service interpreting. Younger interpreters today do not share the apprehension of their predecessors about SI. As a trainer of second year Masters' students in interpreting, I am struck by how attitudes to the two modes have changed over the past twenty years. Students often feel exposed when working in CI and happy to start SI. SI corresponds to an environment of multi-tasking where multiple sources of information feed into snap judgments, whereas CI calls for sequential task management and memory. SI was long perceived as less natural and as more strenuous than CI (Seleskovitch and Lederer 1989). But it corresponds more closely with younger interpreters' world experience. Even though they find SI challenging, they enjoy taking decisions rapidly and the challenge of anticipating meaning. They do not report feeling cut off from the meeting.

1. Jacob, Hans. «Durch die immer weitere Einführung des Simultandolmetschens ist der Beruf des Konferenzdolmetschers entpersönlicht und mechanisiert worden», *Private Market Sector Standing Committee*. «Conference and remote interpreting: a new turning point?», *aiic.net*. March 15, 2011. Accessed January 6, 2017. <http://aiic.net/p/3590>.

At the OECD CI is now requested only occasionally and generally as a fall back solution when a booth is unavailable. The OECD Intranet site's guidance to meeting organizers states clearly that SI is the standard service: «Most of OECD meetings use simultaneous interpretation». It continues «Consecutive interpretation is sometimes used for small working groups, working lunches, field trips or receptions, where technical facilities are not available».

It is used for high-level formal encounters where a booth would appear intrusive, on the one hand, and for small informal working groups where it would be too costly to install, on the other. This may range from interpreting an official speech at a Ministerial dinner or a reception to short exchanges with visiting delegations. Lunches and receptions occasionally require CI as do bilateral meetings of high-ranking visitors. Certainly in such situations interpreting is very visible but CI, with its inevitable interruptions and lengthening of proceedings, is not always welcome. The world has changed since the heyday of consecutive at the League of Nations. Interpreters can no longer afford to deploy effects of oratory but need to get on with the job as quickly and in as self-effacing a manner as possible. Interpreters who provide CI do not report it as being prestigious for the interpreters, even when the events themselves are high-level.

### 3.3. *Simultaneous interpreting today and the place of the interpreter*

Most interpreters, whether staff or freelance, will actually never work in consecutive at an international or multi-lateral organization like the OECD. Their working environment is the interpretation booth. At the OECD SI represents 99% of the workload.

SI is mediated through technical apparatus. The interpreter no longer works in immediate proximity to the speaker and is not seen as standing –literally– in the speaker's place. It has thus created a barrier between the events in the meeting room and the interpreter. The interpreter's workspace is now a delineated, enclosed area fitted with microphones, consoles and headsets. A glass pane provides a view of the room where the actual meeting unfolds. Interpreters are outside, looking in<sup>2</sup>. They inhabit a separate space, one that acquires meaning through the larger, more public space beyond. They are spectators of the meeting, yet required to intervene. Interpreters have been described as «legitimate eavesdroppers» (Hatim and Mason 1997).

SI was introduced to the then OEEC in the mid-1950s, somewhat later than a number of other organizations, and it rapidly became the standard form of interpreting. Staff interpreters had already been exposed to this mode of interpreting when «on

2. Most interpreters have anecdotes of being told by a member of the secretariat that they are not entitled to get documents or to have access to the room. This is of course a mere misunderstanding but it rankles, as it seems to confirm their exclusion.



loan» to the Council of Europe, although training was confined to informal advice from colleagues. In some other organizations some basic SI training was provided when it was first introduced, but this was the exception (Biagorri Jalón 2014).

The space reserved for interpreters at the OECD was redefined with the opening of a new conference center in January 2008. Until then the booths were located on the same level as the meeting rooms, in a recess at the back of each room or tucked into cupboard-like spaces in the corners. Interpreters, although not comfortably installed, were still very visible. The new conference center comprises a separate level for the booths, which are arranged along a long corridor with its own entrance. The choice was made on the basis of architectural constraints. The effect is that the spatial segregation between interpreters and participants is more marked than previously. Interpreters disliked the change, feeling it made them feel less involved in the meeting and cut off from the proceedings. Even now, interpreters express a preference for the five smaller meeting rooms – where the booths are on the same level as the meeting room. Certainly, it is objectively more difficult to maintain communication with the meeting secretariat, to ensure documents are made available or that interpreters are consulted on meeting time changes if the interpreters are physically more separate from the rest of the meeting. Despite these drawbacks, the spatial separation of booths and meeting rooms is fairly typical of organizations generally.

In 2017 a new smaller conference center was opened on the OECD's second site at Boulogne. This time booths could be installed on a level with the meeting rooms, with interpreters visible to participants. Interpreters express a preference for working in these rooms, claiming to feel more involved and to have better communication with the organizers and delegates. In other words, the design of conference centers and the location of booths are of key importance to interpreters' job satisfaction.

In one instance, however, interpreters are felt to be a little too visible, as they can sometimes be seen in the background on the screens that show the speaker which is felt to be distracting and various occlusive films are being tested. This raises interesting questions about the visibility of interpreters. With SI so widespread, their semi-invisibility has become the norm.

### 3.4. *In-booth tools*

Some five years ago monitors were installed in all the booths at the OECD. This is now common practice in organizations. The screens show a view of the room and the speaker. Interpreters use both the screen and a direct view to collect as many visual clues as possible about the meeting pragmatics. They can select their preferred image: they can opt to see the whole room, the speaker or displays such as a PowerPoint, or indeed a mix of these. This gives interpreters some control over the visual input

coming into the booth from the meeting room. Observations of interpreters working at the OECD indicate that they refer to the screen as much, if not more, as the direct view of the room. Monitors are a helpful tool, but they represent a further mediation between the meeting and the interpreters and, as such, create more distance. The use of monitors blurs to some extent the distinction between conventional and remote SI.

## 4. REMOTE PARTICIPATION AND REMOTE INTERPRETING

Although remote participation and remote interpreting (RI) are often grouped together, they use distinct technologies and have a very different impact on interpreters. In RI interpreters work from a «remote» site, i.e. they do not have a direct view of the room. They may be working from a booth in the room next door or hundreds of miles away. The sound from the room is fed into their headsets and they can see the meeting on a monitor. Remote participation describes the situation where one or several participants follow the meeting through remote links. The interpreters can, like all other meeting participants, see the remote participants on a screen and hear their voices if they take the floor. In this configuration the interpreters are not displaced from the meeting, but interpreting may be less comfortable if the link with remote participants is poor.

Both situations are becoming more common.

### 4.1. *Remote interpreting*

Interpreters' initial concerns focused on remote interpreting. This is understandable as it changes radically their place, removing them completely from the meeting space. SI led to the mediation of acoustic contact with the meeting room through headsets and microphones and the physical displacement of interpreters. RI now mediates interpreters' visual contact with the meeting through screens. Although in institutional settings at least both sound and image are usually of adequate quality, the distancing from the meeting is experienced as a negative development by interpreters.

Given the importance for interpreters of proximity and visibility, it is interesting to note that one reason given at the European Union for RI is precisely to reduce interpreter visibility. Ministers at working dinners of the European Council have complained of feeling ill at ease when surrounded by rows of interpreters during dinner. This is not felt to be in keeping with the more confidential exchanges expected. It is also of course uncomfortable to be watched during a meal! In remote mode interpreters can still see in, but an illusion of invisibility is created, even as they continue working. Maintaining the sense of intimacy amongst participants has never been mentioned at the OECD

as a reason for displacing interpreters, but there is a parallel with the request to make interpreters less visible at the new site. This throws up interesting insights into the «place» of the interpreter, both literally and metaphorically.

However, the most frequent reason for remote interpreting in conference situations is currently the unavailability of simultaneous booths. Indeed, this was already the case at one of the first European Union meetings with remote interpreting, i.e. the European summit in Hampton Court in 2005 where it proved impossible to install booths in the historical buildings<sup>3</sup>.

Statistics from AIIC indicate that remote interpreting still represents only a few percentage points of total work, although it is increasing gradually. Moreover, most of the remote interpreting that has occurred could more appropriately be named «proximity interpreting», as it tends to be a minor physical displacement of the interpreters to a nearby room.

At the OECD remote interpreting was used for 50 interpreter sessions, out of a total of 5500, in 2016, almost always because the number of languages required exceeded the number of booths available or the meeting room was not fitted with a booth. It is considered to be a last resort after other options have been explored. The sound is fed from the room via fiber optics through their headphones and is of good quality. An image of the room, speaker and/or visual displays can be seen on monitors. This does not provide as good a view of the room as in standard SI, but it is adequate. Physical proximity is maintained as much as possible. The interpreters in such cases usually work from a booth in an adjacent room, occasionally in a different part of the building.

This is mostly the case in other international organizations for the time being, but the feasibility of more drastic RI is currently being studied at the United Nations, with a view to having interpreters work from one duty station for meetings held at another site.

## 4.2. *The impact of remote interpreting on interpreters*

How do such arrangements affect interpreters and their output? Remote interpreting inevitably changes the way interpreters and their users interact. It is already widely used in other forms of interpreting, such as court proceedings and in medical settings. Although this has generated a broad debate over advantages and drawbacks, around

3. An issue driving remote interpreting currently is growing concern about security and safety of interpreters and other staff when traveling to risky areas. This has been a consideration in the International Courts where judges may travel to hear witnesses, with the other court staff, including interpreters, staying at the headquarters and working through video links. It has not so far been raised in relation to interpreting at the OECD, but there is a growing concern about staff safety and security on remote sites generally.

issues such as confidentiality and trust, access to qualified interpreters and cost, as well as reliability and quality (Alley 2009), the principle of RI in these situations is not called into question. However, in conference interpreting for the time being, it is unusual, perhaps due to the prestige of the settings and speakers and the nature of interventions. RI technology is still rather fragile for complete RI (in contrast to «proximity» RI) for whole teams of interpreters at high level events and its consequences for quality are not yet clear. Thus, the physical presence or proximity of interpreters is still standard practice for conference interpreting.

The first experiments with remote interpreting date back to 1976 at UNESCO in Paris. Various studies on remote interpreting involving conference interpreters were then carried out between 1999 and 2005 – at the United Nations in 1999 and 2001, at the European Parliament in 2001 and 2005 and research involving the ITU and ETI, the Geneva University Interpreting School, in 1999. The findings reveal a discrepancy between objective measurements, such as physical stress markers, and feedback from users, on the one hand, and subjective reports by interpreters, on the other. The largest study dates back to 2005 and was conducted by the European Parliament. It involved 36 interpreters and took place over 5 weeks. Interpreting quality was assessed by users as being equivalent to that under usual interpreting conditions and measures of stress (cortisol, heart beat) were comparable to data for conventional, «proximate» SI<sup>4</sup>. However, the interpreters themselves reported increased strain and fatigue, as well as a sense of alienation. This pattern has been found in all studies so far. Mouzourakis, describing the findings from a 2001 trial at the European Parliament, talked of «the intense physical and psychological discomfort experienced by the remote interpreter» (Mouzourakis 2003, 2006). Roziner and Shlesinger also highlight the discrepancy between performance and interpreters' discomfort (Roziner and Shlesinger 2010).

It has been hypothesized that interpreters in RI need to expend greater effort to maintain a minimum level of quality as there are fewer visual clues and the interpreter has less control over visual input (Andres and Falk 2013). This would explain why some studies show that quality does begin to drop off after a while. Moser noted more errors after thirty minutes in remote than when interpreting in the room, although she attributes this to «lack of proximity to clients and staff [that] produces a feeling of alienation that ultimately results in a lack of motivation» (Moser 2003)<sup>5</sup>.

4. The study is described and analyzed in an article published in 2010: «Much ado about something remote: stress and performance in remote interpreting», *Interpreting*, 12 (2), by Roziner and Shlesinger

5. This fits with findings from studies of court interpreters. Braun notes, on the basis of her extensive research with court interpreting, that «the interpreters worked very close to the limit of their mental capacities» [in remote interpreting] and that «are a significantly higher number of interpreting problems, and a faster decline of interpreting performance over time, in remote

The studies on remote conference interpreting date back more than a decade. No recent large-scale research has been undertaken. Yet it would be very interesting to investigate not only perceptions but also the actual impact of RI, for users and for the interpreters themselves. Much has changed since the studies in 2005. RI has become less unusual, some of the initial anxiety has dissipated and a new generation of interpreters has come on to the market. On the other hand, interpreters continue to attach importance to proximity to participants and organizers.

This explains why in organizations where interpreters are numerous and well-organized, there was some opposition to attempts to introduce RI, even on an exceptional basis. Staff interpreters and their representatives at the European Union negotiated an annex to the agreement on working conditions, providing for shortened hours, reinforced teams and the installation of several screens in remote booths. The latter were intended to recreate the sense of being in the meeting room (Vereycken 2012).

### 4.3. *Interpreters' attitude to remote interpreting at the OECD*

The situation is very different at the OECD, with its staff of just 15 interpreters. RI is mainly used for third languages when there are not enough booths, so the staff interpreters are less affected by it than freelancers. And RI is sufficiently rare for them to feel little impact. This is even more the case for freelance interpreters who have individual contracts with the Interpreting Division. Few of them work for more than 12 days a year at the organization. When a clause was introduced in 2014 into the standard terms and conditions stating that interpreting may be in remote mode if no other option is available, there was no comment. The contract did not provide for special conditions to compensate possible additional strain. One reason for the lack of reaction is probably, as elsewhere, the difficulty of defining and defending a common position on a fragmented market. Observations so far indicate that occasional RI on the same site as the meeting is manageable, but in the absence of studies or even a survey amongst the interpreters concerned it is hard to evaluate the impact.

RI can be seen as part of a broader trend, in as far as it compounds the growing distance of interpreters from the meeting. As we have seen, many booths are on a separate level, with their own access. Furthermore, as the remote participation of delegates becomes more prevalent, interpreters find themselves increasingly working for distant speakers and listeners. Yet, interpreter job satisfaction is still linked to a sense of proximity, both physical and psychological.

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interpreting» (Braun 2013, 200 and 217), although it should be pointed out that the interpreters in the studies were working in CI.

#### 4.4. Remote participation

Remote participation of delegates in the meeting is currently more frequent than remote interpreting, particularly in institutional settings. The 2015 workload survey conducted amongst members by AIIC indicates that the mean number of working days with remote participation was 2 per year, but 7 per year for staff interpreters (AIIC 2015). There are no statistics for this at the OECD specifically, but the figure is certainly much higher, as remote participation now occurs in several interpreted meetings every week.

Remote participation radically changes the meeting space, this time not only for interpreters, indirectly, but for all participants. The space is extended beyond the physical confines of the room. To some extent, the meeting is disconnected from geography. This is reinforced by the spread of webcasting, which allows, for a given period, authorized viewers to have access from anywhere in the world to the conference and often to the interpreting, disconnecting the meeting content from spatial and temporal constraints.

There are many good reasons for remote participation. Actual physical attendance has a cost in terms of both time and travel, a cost that is unequally distributed. Participants from regions far from the venue may spend considerable sums of money to reach the location and lose several days' work. For those who travel across time zones, attendance is likely to be less effective and less focused due to jet lag and fatigue. Many poorer countries are situated some distance from frequently-used meeting venues. All of this lends weight to the argument that more should be done to promote remote participation, as a move towards, not only cost savings, but also more democratic participation.

For all the above reasons, the OECD conference services have actively promoted remote participation. The Intranet site has an attractive presentation of a range of remote participation options. A clear set of guidelines exists for remote participants, including prior tests with the OECD audio-visual service. This is intended to ensure good technical conditions for valid participation. Compliance, as elsewhere, is variable. There is a certain tension between the perception of greater freedom and cost savings afforded by remote participation and the constraints of prior tests and ensuring adequate video conferencing equipment. Users are encouraged to have a technician in the room if they use remote participation, but they are often reluctant to pay for this service. Furthermore, this technology is still very novel. Whilst rules for physical attendance of meetings are by now codified and accepted: conventions (whether personal conventions, such as professional dress, or meeting conventions such as giving the floor) for remote participation have not as yet had time to emerge and be codified.

Generally, the quality of remote participation –depending as it does on compliance by multiple remote sites and on a range of tools– is less reliable than remote interpreting which is organized within a more controlled framework.

Interpreters are of course directly affected by these new forms of attendance. They are required to interpret statements by remote participants and in some cases to interpret for them. With poor or irregular sound and image quality this can be a struggle. Remote participation using single channel systems such as Skype and WebEx does not physically displace the interpreters from the meeting space, but it does marginalize interpreting, as the remote participants can either listen to the floor throughout or to an interpreting channel, but not both. Therefore, if a participant in the room asks a language other than the one selected in advance, they cannot be understood by the remote participants. This prevents interpreting from playing its role in inter-linguistic exchange and makes it less relevant.

Remote communications are also generating new forms of interpreting requests in international and multilateral organizations. In a step towards further dematerialization, many meetings, even at quite a formal level, now take place without a main physical venue as such, but via one or several telephone links. Interpreting may be required. This is of course commonplace in other forms of interpreting, in medical settings, for instance. Recent exchanges amongst Head Interpreters in international organizations have highlighted a marked increase in these requests for conference interpreters. A variety of technical options are adopted, sometimes with interpreters in booths or, more generally, the interpreter uses a phone with a headset and/or whispers. In all cases the input provided to interpreters is poorer than in a standard meeting as they cannot see the other sites and sound is often unreliable. Such requests are rare at the OECD, but not unknown. They include a pilot project with SI for webinars linking three remote sites, as well as occasional bilateral meetings by telephone.

Confronted with increasing use of Skype for Business, WebEx and even telephone participation in meetings, the OECD Interpreting Division carried out a series of tests in 2013 with the audiovisual team to see how feasible it is for interpreters to work with such channels. Three series of tests were conducted using WebEx and Skype. Speeches were delivered via both systems by a member of the interpreting team and interpreted by staff interpreters. Each interpreter provided an evaluation of the feasibility and difficulty of the exercise. A general debriefing was held with the whole team. The conclusion was that sound is unreliable. Poor sound-image synchronization was judged disturbing. However, such systems are frequently used in OECD meetings, as elsewhere. They are chosen for their flexibility, ease-of-use and low cost. Unless sound is very poor, interpreters generally continue working, although they do find this tiring. The Division is currently conducting a survey to find out how often remote participation occurs in meetings with interpreting and to identify and correct the most frequent problems.

Interpreters' complaints about inadequate remote links tend to be seen as an annoyance, especially if they are often the only protesting voice. They risk being perceived as standing in the way of what is otherwise an advance towards more flexible meeting communications. Ideally, their assessment of remote connections and their input would be used as a benchmark for defining minimum quality criteria. This could improve listening comfort for all, as other stakeholders have little opportunity to comment on remote links.

## 5. SPEED AND NATURE OF MEETINGS: MOVING TOWARDS BREAKING POINT?

### 5.1. *The dominance of English*

Some features of today's conferences add to interpreters' sense of being less part of the meeting and less relevant. The frequent dominance of English is perhaps foremost amongst these.

The number of languages interpreted in even the most multilingual of organizations is smaller than that of the native languages of all speakers. The gap is particularly large in bilingual organizations, especially as their membership grows. At the OECD, the majority of speakers have to intervene in a non-native language, with a vast range of accents and speech patterns imported from their own language. Studies show that these are all factors problematic for interpreters (Sabatini 2000; Donovan 2009). Albl-Mikasa notes that speakers of English as a lingua franca often have «restricted power of expression» and «limited capacity to present their line of reasoning in a logical, coherent and targeted manner». All this requires greater effort from interpreters if they are «to recover intended speaker meaning» (Albl-Mikasa 2014, 26).

The unequal distribution of languages is a source of frustration, as there is less inter-linguistic exchange. Surveys conducted at the OECD show that interpreter job satisfaction is directly related to language diversity in meetings (Donovan, 2009). Near-exclusive use of one language (generally English) deprives interpreters of a major source of motivation which is to assist in inter-linguistic exchange. In such a context, interpreters' needs, notably receiving texts in advance or persuading speakers to slow their delivery, are less likely to be taken into consideration. The lack of inter-linguistic communication drives interpreters further from the meeting, this time not physically but psychologically, as they come to feel that they are irrelevant.



## 5.2. The pace of meetings

SI marked the beginning of a squeezing of meeting time. Prior to SI meeting time was linear, with each speech and the ensuing consecutive lasting the full duration of the utterance. SI performed the neat trick of doubling a speech back over on itself, layering any number of language versions in the same lapse of time. This was the start of a trend that has continued and seems to be accelerating.

Conferences are increasingly marked by acceleration and densification of content. This requires more rapid analysis by interpreters – and indeed by listeners generally<sup>6</sup>. In the workload study on interpreter stress and burnout commissioned by the AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence) in 2001, 78 per cent of all respondents rated fast delivery rate as the major source of stress in their work. Over the years, numerous studies have been carried out on the problems associated with interpreting fast speeches. In these studies, it is often argued that since the total cognitive capacity of the interpreter is limited and they work «close to processing capacity saturation», as set out in Gile's efforts' model (Gile 1999), any increase in difficulty, such as speed, will cause output to suffer. An early study by Gerver (1969) showed that interpreting accuracy began to deteriorate once delivery speed exceeded 120 words per minute, whereas accuracy of shadowing only deteriorated at higher speeds. Subsequent studies confirmed this trend (Pio 2003; Barghout, Ruiz Rosendo and Varela Garcia 2015).

On this basis, early authors on interpreting stipulated that speed of delivery should not exceed 100 to 120 words per minute (see Riccardi 2015). Lederer suggested that a rate of 100 words per minute was appropriate for formal, recited texts (Lederer 1981). Déjean dedicated her doctoral research to the added difficulties of interpreting read interventions. She identified speed as one difficulty, but also noted that read texts are harder to interpret than those delivered freely, owing to lack of pauses, less redundancy and non-spontaneous intonation (Déjean 1978).

Many speeches in conferences today are both read and delivered at high speed, compounding the problems for interpreters. Spontaneous speeches or texts pronounced at the rate of 100 words a minute are increasingly unusual in international meeting situations. Certainly observations of meetings at the OECD and elsewhere show that speakers often read either a full text or notes, frequently from a computer or tablet screen, reducing spontaneity, redundancy and natural intonation patterns. The difficulty of interpreting speeches read at high speed is an issue regularly addressed

6. In a recent study of rates of delivery of news bulletins on four radio stations, it was observed that listeners had more trouble understanding information as speech rate increased (Rodero 2012).

amongst Head Interpreters<sup>7</sup>. A study with academic researchers is now planned to be launched to examine the consequences of fast delivery on interpreters. This will be defined and directed by a sub-group of lamladp, a community founded by the United Nations but open to other organizations<sup>8</sup>.

With on-line communication now so all-pervasive, much discussion and exchange occurs outside the conference event through email, social media, on-line communities and conference calls. The conference itself is often held, not so much to discuss issues, as to validate reports, to take formal decisions and to present statements. Meetings also provide a framework for the valuable networking that takes place during coffee breaks and social events. This leaves interpreters in many meetings having to render a long series of statements or reports rather than debates and discussions. In such cases, they have little sense of being part of authentic exchange, much of which occurs outside the meeting room. This, as many of the other trends identified here, creates a sense of estrangement from the real substance of the meeting.

## 6. TECHNOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION

### 6.1. *Technology and the participants*

One new feature of meetings today as compared to even twenty years ago is the pervasive penetration of technology into the meeting space. The presence of simultaneous interpreting equipment –headsets, microphones and the booths themselves– has long been a distinctive feature of many conference rooms. And indeed, the introduction of SI marked the beginnings of the «technologization» of the meeting space. However, the early equipment was a very different kind of technology, plodding and mechanical, from today's electronic tools which open up access to a seemingly limitless world of knowledge. The space of the meeting room is extended, its walls pushed back into the virtual space, by the information and communications technology that gives access to websites, to data and to people in the wider world

7. This is probably part of a broader trend. Research indicates that news bulletins are read faster than previously at rates of between 165 and 210 words per minute (Rodero 2012). Similar research in China has also noted a steady acceleration of delivery for Chinese news broadcasts over past decades (Li 2010). A study of the speed of delivery of TED talks indicates about 160 words per minute on average, even though these presentations are designed for comfortable listening (Dlugan, Andrew. 2012. «What is the Average Speaking Rate?» <http://sixminutes.dlugan.com/speaking-rate/>, accessed January 6, 2017

8. Lamladp or the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, was set up by the United Nations to bring together managers in language services in international organizations. It is a forum for discussion and a network. It now has some 80 members.

outside. Thus, it is not just remote participation that expands the meeting space but all the interactions and access to information that unfurl from each participant's electronic devices. Interpreters bring into the booth their own devices and consult them throughout the meeting, even when interpreting. The booth is a microcosm of the meeting room.

## 6.2. Technology and the interpreters

It would be hard to over-state the radical importance for interpreters of access to on-line resources, initially for preparation but now also during the meeting. It has transformed the way they work. Yet, this has been very much a silent revolution. Internet, especially combined with WiFi, has given interpreters control over and free access to information. In the past they depended on cumbersome printed documents provided by organizers or they had to hunt down snippets of information in technical textbooks and dictionaries that they had to take on trust and that were quickly outdated. They now have constant access to a multitude of sources at any time and in any place. Internet is ideally suited to the needs of interpreters, providing quick, up-to-the-minute information on current events and latest developments in a range of fields. Interpreters can consult YouTube broadcasts to become familiar with speakers; they can double check information; look up a huge range of on-line glossaries; they can add to their terminology in the booth, using applications on laptops or tablets and consult sites in real time while working. They can also confer with colleagues via cloud computing and set up platforms with shared glossaries.

An interview in October 2016 with staff interpreters about their preparation and use of electronic resources in the booth confirmed that on-line preparation of documents and reference material is standard practice. They are all issued with laptop computers which they use in the booth. All the interpreters use various applications to open zips, to help reading and to annotate these documents<sup>9</sup>. They prepare on-line glossaries by subject matter and also by meeting and share these on an on-line platform with colleagues.

However, they still print out certain documents, such as the agenda as well as key documents, especially in their third languages. They also work with hard copy documents in the booth quite extensively, during drafting sessions or when a document is being read out. They are selective, as they accept that printing out everything is a waste of natural resources and bulky packs of documents are heavy and awkward to carry around. Their approach is flexible and depends on the meeting and the speaker<sup>10</sup>.

9. Examples given include Notability and GoodReader.

10. Interview with staff interpreters at OECD, November 2016.

The attitudes and working practices of younger interpreters were not fundamentally different from those of their older colleagues.

These new tools and applications are vital for interpreters keep up with the faster pace of meetings, to prepare more efficiently and to use accurate and up-to-date terminology. Kalina and Ziegler have gone so far as to describe the various technical applications used by interpreters in the booth as «computed-aided interpreting», for the tools not only assist in the important, but peripheral tasks of preparation, terminology and information finding, but are also used in the booth (Kalina and Ziegler 2015).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Despite the continuity of interpretation which remains an integral feature of many international conferences, the meeting environment has changed considerably and is likely to change further, as technology shapes communications both inside and outside the meeting.

Simultaneous interpreting can be seen as the first step towards both the spatial and temporal redefinition of meetings. It created a separate space, on the edges of or outside the main meeting area. It also broke the linearity of speech-plus-interpreting, enabling multiple language versions to coincide in time with the original speech. This was the start of a trend towards spatial extension, on the one hand, and compression of content, on the other; a trend that continues today. Currently, formal meetings are being extended further, with the increasing use of remote participation and also remote interpreting. As more meetings take place using tele-conferencing, interpreters in international organizations are being asked to interpret meetings that have no physical center. These are relatively new changes for conference interpreters, even if they are widely used in other forms of interpreting. They call into question established standards of quality for sound and image feeds.

The meeting space is no longer defined purely in geographical terms but is shaped by access to communications and information technology, and it is being redefined constantly, for interpreters as for participants. We are currently in a transitory phase in which new technologies are being tested out in formal conferences and standards are not fully established.

The pace of meetings is accelerating. Meeting formats and styles are changing, becoming more compressed, and so putting greater pressure on interpreters' mental resources. This acceleration is reinforced by new meeting formats. Breakout sessions in effect superimpose several layers of content in the same time frame. Stage-managed forums and smoothly-moderated panel discussions are replacing old-style meetings. Meetings often packaged as a single seamless productions, squeezing out redundancy and improvisation. It is not unusual for experienced journalists from major television

channels to be hired to moderate meetings. This can be seen as a long-term trend towards greater professionalization of meetings<sup>11</sup>.

Yet, at the same time technology offers tools to help cope with such changes. It provides constant, immediate access to information. As interpreters find themselves working more frequently close to saturation point, they will need such allies and aids. Interpreters already use a range of tools both for preparation and in the booth to enhance input and augment resources – monitors to see better the speaker, shared on-line glossaries and other material. The next stage could well be to use in SI voice-to-text system that prints out the speaker's words, providing interpreters with figures, names, serving as a kind of checklist to ease the strain on memory. Of course, each new tool requires more processing capacity, but this is a part of the pattern of working environments where multi-tasking is often the trade-off for easing the load on memory.

Conference interpreting is a fairly expensive service and could therefore become a target for automation. However, machine interpreting as a viable substitute for human interpreters in conference situations seems a long way off. Moreover, changes in the place and role of conference interpreters have not been driven by cost considerations. The introduction of SI aimed to compress more languages into the same meeting time. The introduction of RI has resulted from spatial constraints. But even if this remains true, conference interpreting may become vulnerable if it is perceived as an impediment to the stretching and redefining of the fabric of meetings. Interpreters will have to be careful not to reinforce this perception by rejecting new technologies or configurations out of hand. It is not realistic to believe that interpreters' objections will halt or check changing trends in communication in meetings. At the same time, interpreters cannot accept conditions that undermine the quality and reliability of their service. A constructive option would be to define conditions that are sufficient for interpreting as a benchmark for comfortable participation more generally. Interpreters' input about remote participation in particular could be valuable when defining new standards.

Despite the many challenges described in this article, interpreters and interpreting still have their place in communication in international and multilateral organizations. This is certainly the case of the OECD where, although English is very widespread, demand for interpreting has actually increased and diversified over the past five years. Interpreters have proved their flexibility, resorting to new devices and tools to accelerate their access to terminology and knowledge in order to keep up with the pace of meetings. They are adapting to remote interpreting and remote participation. Interpreting –and interpreters– still have a place in the conference environment, but that place is changing, as meetings themselves change.

11. This point came up in a private interview with Christopher Thiéry, a former OEEC interpreter, October 2015.

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