Interpreting at the United Nations: the impact of external variables. The Interpreters' View

La interpretación en las Naciones Unidas: el impacto de las variables externas. La visión del intérprete

Jesús BAIGORRI-JALÓN and Críspulo TRAVIESO-RODRÍGUEZ

(Alfaqueque Research Group, University of Salamanca)

Abstract: Based on previous specific research on the topic, on responses to questionnaires sent to three different United Nations (UN) duty stations (New York, Geneva, Vienna) at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, and on UN unofficial and institutional sources, the authors reflect on how external variables have altered UN interpreters' working conditions in recent years and how they have had an impact on the quality of their performance. Some of the points mentioned in the replies to questionnaires are related, *inter alia*, to the speed of delivery of speeches, the influence of information technologies or the use of remote interpreting. Apart from the statistical data obtained from the questionnaires, we have used brief excerpts from interpreters' personal narratives to illustrate the analysis of the present-day situation and the interpreters' prospects for the future.

Key words: Conference interpreting, survey, information technologies, remote interpreting, external variables, speed, tag cloud.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this paper is to present the results of an unpublished empirical research carried out in 2010-2011 on the basis of a survey we launched among United Nations interpreters from the three main duty stations (New York, Geneva and Vienna), who were asked to give their opinion on how changes in their working conditions during the last two decades or so had affected their professional performance. The results have been complemented with material from other sources. Previous general research on the topic of simultaneous interpreting can be found in seminal works such as Gile (2009/1995), and more specifically for the issue at hand in Baigorri Jalón (2003a, 2003b, 2004), Chiaro and Nocella (2004), Pöchhacker and Zwischenberger (2010) and, quite recently, Barghout and Ruiz Rosendo and Varela García (2015), an article which provides a useful overview of research background in this field. The object of this research fits into «interpreting practice», one of the most popular research lines in the last decade (Yan *et al.* 2013).

The United Nations has six official languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish), which are available, in written and spoken modes, to delegates from all Member States as vehicles of communication[1]. This means that almost 50% of the delegates cannot use their mother tongue, but rather a foreign language, nowadays mostly English, with a cascade of consequences for end listeners and also for interpreters. The use of English as the preferred *lingua franca* has enormous repercussions on its role as source– or target-language –with an impact on workload differences among booths– and also on the molding of mindsets and negotiation styles to (typically) Anglo-Saxon «anthropological» patterns[2]. Concerns about the balance among the six official languages go back at least to General Assembly resolution 50/11 (of 15 November 1995) where regret was expressed by Member States about the unequal use «in the United Nations of the different official languages and of the working languages of the Secretariat»[3]. That initiative has been followed regularly until now through the adoption of successive resolutions on *Multilingualism*, a confirmation of

1. The choice of a limited number of languages was and continues to be based on political grounds and not on the respective communication value of each language, at least not in all cases. For instance, Chinese is used by only one member state and Arabic was added to the UN language regime only in the 1970s. Many language professionals agree that a seventh language, UN*ese*, is also part and parcel of the language combination used at the international organization. In fact, that seventh language is spoken in the several «dialects» used by the various UN bodies and specialized agencies.

2. One of the advantages of an increasingly uniform environment is the existence of «tacit norms, whereby simultaneous conference interpreters are not expected to take the range of cultural backgrounds into account» (Setton 2006: 379).

3. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N95/256/82/PDF/N9525682.pdf?OpenElement

the persistent or increasing imbalance among languages. A report by the Secretary General on this matter (A/69/282, of 7 August 2014) gives an indication of the use of the six official languages by offering in figure 1 (p. 16) the statistics of website page views by language between 1 June 2012 and 27 May 2014: 60% English; 19% Spanish; 8 % French; 5% Russian; 5% Chinese, and 3% Arabic[4]. We are aware that these data cannot be extrapolated «literally» to oral communication percentages, but they are in all likelihood indicative of a situation that anyone familiar with the UN would subscribe to. The truth is that, as some of our informants say [I-07-NY][5], thanks to the increasing trend towards a pre-eminence of English, the ability to speak and understand English among non-native speakers has improved considerably in recent years.

The usual interpreting mode in conference settings at the UN has been *in situ* simultaneous interpreting since the late 1940s, and our findings refer mostly to that mode[6]. Interpreters from each booth are supposed to transfer speeches delivered in the other five official languages into that of their booth, but that does not mean that they are capable of interpreting from all the official languages. The tradition adopted at the UN was that interpreters would work into their mother tongue –whatever that means for polyglots. However, the UN Chinese and Arabic booths interpret both ways, that is, into and from their respective languages, while the other four booths usually work from two other languages into their own. So relay interpreting is necessary for all booths, with the risks involved in the losses caused by double translation, when reliability but also *relayability* may suffer.

The raw material which interpreters use is made up of speeches delivered by UN delegates or other participants at UN meetings in any of the official languages. Languages are not univocal entities, even considering that UN*ese* brings about a certain degree of standardization. So the transfer facilitated by interpreters is far from being a simple chemical formula where the mixture of element *a* with element *b* in the source language always produces a corresponding blend of element *a'* with element *b'* in the target language.

The number of official languages has not been altered since the 1970s, but a number of circumstances have modified the working environment. The variety of UN meetings is huge in terms of format, content and political significance. The number and type of participants at UN-hosted meetings has risen due to the enormous enlargement of membership and to the increasing participation of non-governmental organizations

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4. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N14/498/91/PDF/N1449891.pdf?OpenElement

5. This code, used throughout the article, identifies informant (I), number attributed to each respondent in our data base, and duty station.

6. Consecutive interpreting is still used at the UN in bilateral meetings, both at Headquarters and other duty stations, as well as in various settings in the field. We will refer to the remote interpreting mode later on in this paper.

or partners from the so-called civil society. Besides, the last two-decade period or so has witnessed a revolution in information and communication technologies. Even if the linguistic exercise of listening in one language and translating into another has remained unchanged, the truth is that technologies have had a decisive impact on the way language exchange is understood and also on the approaches interpreters and other language professionals have to take to adapt to the new technological developments[7]. Interpreters' performance control by senior staff is applied at two levels: during the UN staff interpreters' selection process [see Ruiz Rosendo and Diur's paper in this volume], where previous specialized training is tested –in the case of free-lance interpreters, selection criteria are based on previous professional experience or *ad hoc* accreditation tests by heads of service and booth–, and throughout their careers, with periodic performance reports produced by their respective chiefs of booth and chiefs of service[8]. Performance can be improved through in-house training –sometimes carried out on a voluntary basis by senior colleagues who supervise junior candidates, for instance, when adding a new language– and also through courses outside the Organization in fields like language refresher courses, or information technologies and other specialized courses or seminars.

2. CHANGES THAT AFFECT INTERPRETING QUALITY

In this context, it seems relevant to refer to the changes which interpreters have experienced in their working conditions as factors which have an impact on the quality of interpreted speeches. We are aware that quality is a slippery concept (see abundant literature on the topic derived from research initiated and edited by Collados Aís, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Pradas 2004, 2007; Barranco Droege *et al.* 2013; García Becerra *et al.* 2013), but there are a number of common elements around which agreement could be easily reached. Sense consistency, logical cohesion, completeness, fluency of delivery and grammar correction would be the most widely accepted components to judge the quality of interpretation as a final product (Chiaro & Nocella 2004, Pöchhacker & Zwischenberger 2010). This assessment takes place irrespective of the fact that –since the original speech is not subject to an *a priori* evaluation– consistency, cohesion, fluency of delivery, completeness or grammar may be absent, at least partially, from the source utterance. Quality issues, as Pöchhacker & Zwischenberger say, have an impact on the role interpreters feel they are playing, that is, on the evolving contours of the profession.

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7. For a detailed description of the different language functions at the United Nations, see the UN Language Portal: http://www.unlanguage.org/default.aspx

8. In interpreting, as in other professions, cooptation has been the usual way to incorporate new practitioners to the dominant oligarchy, as Abbott (1988: 167) would say.

Those issues have clear ethical implications, for instance by driving practitioners to opt for a truthful rendition of the original speech rather than a more accurate –that is, verbally literal– transfer of the utterance (Seeber & Zelger 2007: 297). In this context, an additional burden for UN interpreters may be linked to the fact that their performances in official meetings are usually recorded and made available to other language experts who become highly qualified users of the interpreters' output, namely, verbatim reporters and translators, who can use the recordings as a basis for the drafting, respectively, of their verbatim or summary records[9]. In such meetings, interpreters may feel that their peers from the other UN language sections hold a quality standard –even if *in situ* interpreting should be considered only as a distant relative of the written exercise– which favors literal rendition. An informal comparative analysis carried out by UN verbatim reporters, whose takes in ten-minute shifts are beyond subjective perception, shows that the number of words uttered in every shift experienced a 25% increase between 2000 and 2010. [I-19-NY]

Unpublished information from the minutes of an interpreters' staff meeting held at UN headquarters in New York on November 18, 2009, shows, *inter alia*, their perception of technical problems they encounter which negatively affect their professional status:

> Lately the quality of the service we provide has been compromised due to speed of delivery and lack of texts. This also generates unusual fatigue and a sense of uselessness and frustration. […]
> […] speakers deliver their texts at such a speed that even listeners in the original language cannot absorb the content. Statements are not acts of communication anymore, since delegates just read for the record.
>
> […] this situation is very undermining and demoralizing for the interpreter.
>
> Besides […], interpreters have to deal with interferences caused by delegates' cell phones and laptops.
>
> […] Another recent negative trend is that many delegations, when delivering speeches, do not provide interpreters with the texts. This is particularly worrisome in the Security Council and it is especially hard for certain booths that have to provide relay.

A non-paper entitled *Speed Management Suite of Documents* was produced by an informal discussion group of interpreters around the same date (ca. 2009, unpublished and undated), where lists of in-booth and out-of-the-booth technical solutions to cope with excessive speed are proposed. Most of the techniques, if not all, are well-known, so

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9.   Verbatim records are drafted only for limited UN bodies, such as the Security Council or the General Assembly, which usually meet at UN headquarters.

the value of that document is that it facilitates a quick overview in a summarized version [I-10-NY]. Those techniques include reducing the length of the target speech by, *inter alia*, using acronyms instead of long treaties or conventions names or titles, thinning non-meaning bearing rhetoric, rounding numbers, eliminating repetitions and redundancies, simplifying sentences, etc. Even if Gile's efforts model is not mentioned, the underlying idea is that the proposed solutions aim at liberating resources to better maintain the delicate balance among the complex operations involved in simultaneous interpreting.

3. CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is an observational study, pro-empirical (based on a survey) and mostly heuristic or exploratory (Yan *et al.* 2013), since the survey we launched (see appendix I), although based on hypotheses derived from previous research, generates other opinions from our participants' replies. Input variables are elements which are taken into account as the main ingredients explored in the survey, with the issue of quality as an overarching, though difficult to define, aim in professional performance. The use of semi-structured surveys would classify the nature of our research as qualitative. Perception by participating interpreters of the conditions in which they develop their work often includes insightful descriptions of the challenges involved as well as of the strategies used in order to meet those challenges. Although the survey was addressed to interpreters working in the UN institutional context at the time when the questionnaire was sent, the fact that a number of replies came from seasoned interpreters often adds a diachronic perspective. That amounts, in our view, to a valuable source for assessing how the profession, as practiced in an organization which pioneered simultaneous interpreting seventy years ago, has consolidated and evolved in the face of political, sociological and technological changes.

We understand external variables as those specific properties of the original speeches and their contexts that are out of the interpreters' control, irrespective of their professional competence, and may break the delicate balance between the input speech and the output produced by interpreters. Gile (2009[2]) developed his efforts' model into his tightrope hypothesis. Seeber (2011) has questioned in an article on syntactically asymmetrical languages, the validity of Gile's point that interpreters work most of the time at the level of saturation, and has proposed a different model of cognitive load. Based on the observations made by interpreters who responded to our survey, we can assume that UN interpreters attribute potential interpreting failures to working conditions that are close to the saturation level. In the absence of that tightrope hypothesis, failures should be attributed to lack of competence, that is, «to insufficient linguistic or extralinguistic knowledge or mistakes rather than to chronic cognitive tension between processing capacity supply and demand (Gile 2009[2]: 182).

We posit that recent changes brought about by the wide use of information technologies are having a significant impact on the way in which interpreters approach their work at different levels: a) their preparatory process; b) the way in which the original message is perceived (cognitive elements, where sound quality and speed of delivery play significant roles); and c) the attitudinal approach, associated with current changes in users' expectations, related in no small measure to a technological framework where instantaneity and almost unlimited speed are taken for granted. In this context, speeches, interpreted or not, have to compete –often at a considerable disadvantage– with easy access to instant sources of information, –such as tablets, smartphones, etc. As one of our informants puts it:

> Increased use of ITC technology has had both positive and negative impact on the working conditions of the interpreters though one can hardly discern the precise intensity or frequency of this impact. [I-24-Vienna]

In the interpreting preparatory process, information technologies are important tools to study the subject-matter of the meeting to be interpreted. In this context, the nature of the changes in the presentation of official documents can be seen as revolutionary, not only because of paper to digital migration but also because of the increased sophistication of the organization's documents series, which are now sometimes available –of course not only thanks to technology but also to human efforts– as bi-texts, where one can compare on opposite columns the specific terminology associated with the meeting or the full collection of documents necessary for a conference in a pen drive provided by the organization. This has allowed for easier access to documents by interpreters, including free-lancers, from their homes or from planes or commuting trains or buses, thus making travel time a productive period in their preparatory stages. Obviously, this trend applies not only to United Nations official documents or other non-official sources, but also to other translation tools, such as dictionaries, glossaries, etc.

4. DATA COLLECTION

A questionnaire was sent via e-mail to a potential n = >200, through the respective chiefs of service in order to ensure anonymity. After a reminder, sent two weeks later, replies were received from 32 subjects in three different languages (English, French, Spanish), with a higher rate of response from the Spanish booth interpreters in New York, as expected since one of the authors of this article was a former staff interpreter at that duty station. This modest piece of research would not have been possible without the use of information and communication technologies, including the processing and storage of replies in two data bases, using Access and Excel. In this qualitative case

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study the size of the sample obtained does not aim to be statistically significant, but replies received are, in our view, still valid for the purpose of the research, as they are the echo of a microsociological group from an institution. The semi-structured nature of the questionnaire has yielded different personal opinions, some of which will be used in the discussion part of this paper.

The results of the administration of valid questionnaires received (a total of 32) are shown in the following charts.
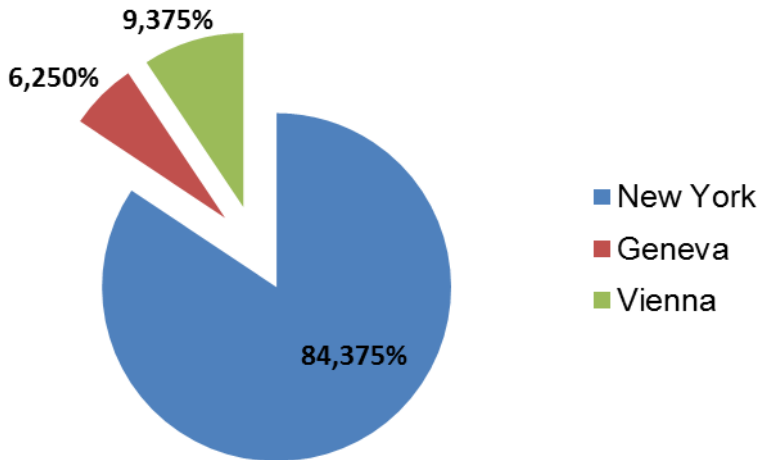

Chart 1: Replies by duty stations

Chart 1 shows an expected disproportionate majority of respondents from the UN headquarters in New York. That factor serves also to explain, at least partly, our next chart.
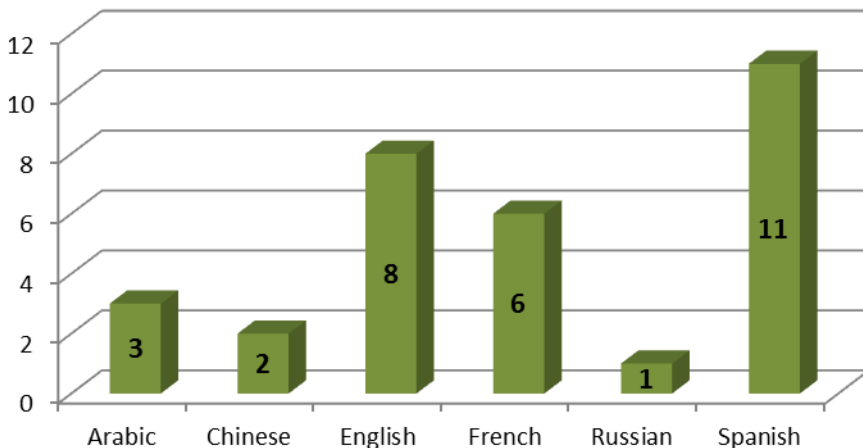

Chart 2: Replies by booths.

Responses by gender (chart 3) approximately represent the gender (im)balance which prevails among UN interpreters nowadays. Data from an article on the feminization of the profession (Baigorri-Jalón 2003) confirm the ratio.
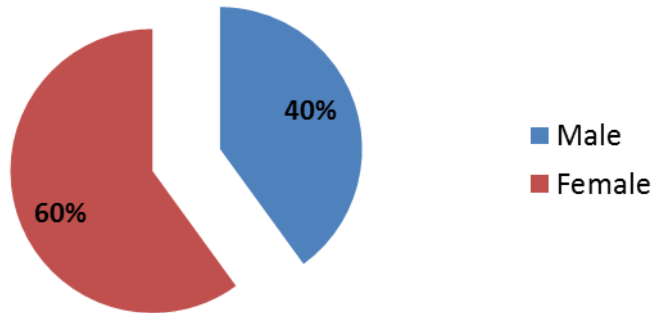

Chart 3: Replies by gender.
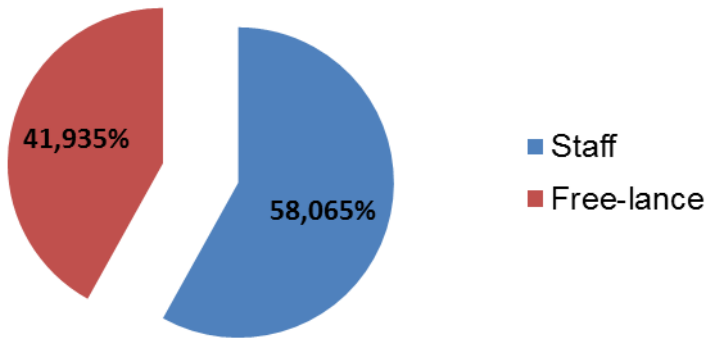
Chart 3: Replies by status.

The high proportion of free-lance interpreters among the informants hides the fact that most of them have previously been staff interpreters, as confirmed by the two following charts (age distribution and years of experience), which suggest the frequent offer of temporary contracts to retirees. Their institutional memory will be referred to in the discussion.

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Chart 4: Replies by age groups (%).
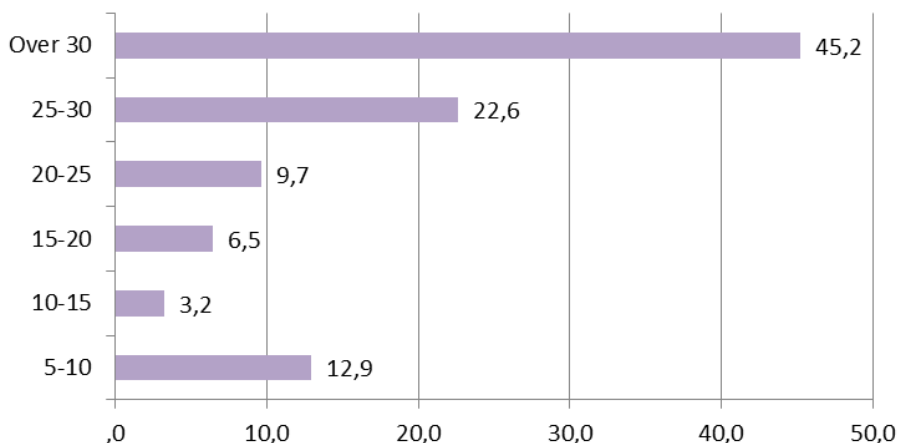
Chart 5: Replies by years of interpreting experience (%).

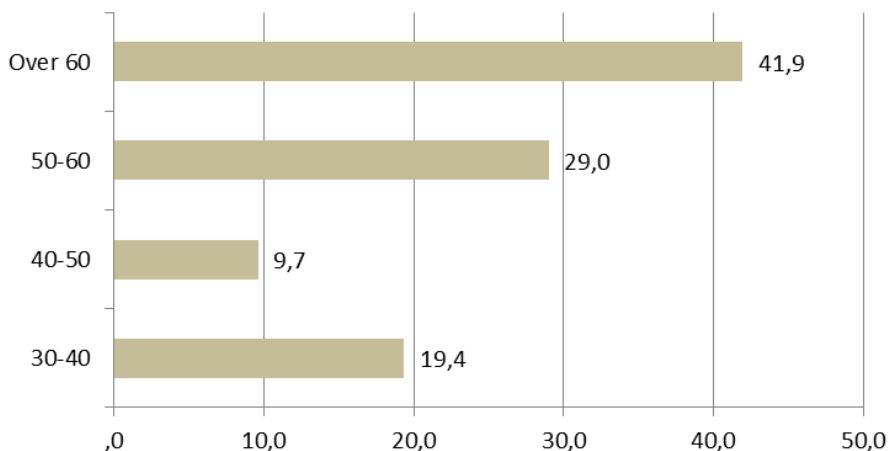Although we assume that our informants' responses are intended to be value free, there are conditions, such as attitudes or even beliefs and emotions that may have conditioned their answers. Their views are, thus, personal, and as such are reflected in quotations from personal narratives included in the open question spaces provided in the questionnaire. For instance, experiments in remote interpreting carried out in recent years at the UN can be seen as the beginning of a significant change in the current technological paradigm. That perception may entail a movement of resistance –including at collective level– from subjects working according to the conventional *in situ* simultaneous system. Less frequent mention is made of ethical issues, meaning perhaps a greater consensus on the issue of an established professional code of ethics.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The key of the equation between input and output should be to maintain the high quality standards that have characterized United Nations interpreters' performance since the origins of the organization. Some of the UN institutional arrangements –such as the number of official languages, the main bodies, and the use of the simultaneous interpreting mode– have remained unchanged, but conditions of work have evolved with time, as pointed out earlier in this paper, and most particularly with the impact of information technologies, associated with institutional changes.

We would concur with the results of the survey on quality among 286 conference interpreters worldwide carried out by Chiaro and Nocella (2004) and the one proposed by Pöchhacker and Zwischenberger (2010) on quality assessment by AIIC interpreters. The results of both pieces of research emphasize that sense consistency, logical cohesion, fluency of delivery, correct terminology and correct grammar are the most widely accepted factors to judge interpreting quality of interpretation as the final product. From the results we have obtained, those generally accepted elements are affected by several factors beyond the interpreters' control, which require various coping strategies.

The problem most frequently evoked in the replies, irrespective of age, gender or working experience, is by far speed of delivery of the original speech. The findings in the experiment carried out by Barghout *et al.* (2015) with expert interpreters in the UN context confirm that speed is a maximum constraint factor for 9 out of 10 of the participants (Barghout *et al.* 2015: 329). The results we present here refer to a previous date, so there seems to be continuity in the occurrence of the problem. In the perception and analysis stage, speed proves to be the most salient issue. Speed is not a discrete variable –literature on this topic is huge– and the reference for instance only to the number of words per minute hides many other elements both within the language and between the languages involved. Although speed has always been a decisive factor influencing interpreters' performance, as shown for example by the devices installed in interpreting consoles to call the attention of the sound engineer, the speaker or the chair of the meeting, the situation in recent times has acquired levels unknown in the past. They are due to several factors, some related to the logistical conditions of the United Nations and others to more general reasons. It is not the same to handle the original fifty-one founding Member States as it is for the 193 present-day membership. Since sessions usually have strict calendars and the length of meetings is regulated by working conditions applied to different trades and professions (including interpreters), the organization has increasingly resorted to instruct chairpersons to reduce delegates' speaking time. The imaginable consequence is that typical speakers –«I use the term "speakers" very loosely. It means really people who take the floor» [I-06-NY]– make their full statements crammed into a few-minutes slot, «to the point of stumbling over [their] words» [I-01-Geneva].

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As mentioned by some of our informants, the consequences of this circumstance are clear: in order to say as much as possible, spontaneous speech has often been replaced by read-out speeches, where interpreting resembles more to a sight translation exercise than to a real oral interpreting activity.

> I have only been at the UN for 18 months, before that I was working in Europe as a freelance interpreter. I am struck by how much of our work here at UNHQ involves «sight translation» of texts read at speed by delegates. […] it is not true interpreting, and does not facilitate communication. [I-09-NY]

Interpreting read speeches involves a double process at the same time: the transfer between a written and an oral «product» (a procedure which demands skills often ignored by speakers) and between the source and the target languages, with potentially negative consequences in the three components found in every message (verbal, semantic and intentional) (Seeber and Zelger 2007: 293). Another element which compounds the problem is that delegates read their speeches from their computers without providing the written text: «a text read from a screen seems to be even further from natural speech than one read from a sheet of paper [I-01-Geneva]. The lack of a printed version of the speech, where interpreters can jot down notes or symbols for reference, is underscored by several of our informants as one of the negative consequences associated with the reading of speeches from a screen.

When a conscientious and rational analysis of the information flow becomes difficult, interpreters need to resort to peripheral routes, where analysis is replaced by more automatic and superficial responses to the original stimuli, prioritizing teleological over deontological ethical solutions (Seeber and Zelger 2007: 294 *et seq.*). Coping strategies have been voiced by a number of our interpreters to tackle the problem of preserving accuracy even when the reasonable conditions of oral utterances are not respected by speakers: from «educating the speakers» to «compressing» the original speech (see the UN interpreters' *ABC* in captions at the end of the paper. Other measures, such as speaking with their own voice in order to explain potential difficulties or even breakdowns in the communication flow, are sometimes necessary to safeguard interpreters' professional code of ethics or, at times, to save face.

The *in situ* vs. the remote mode, mentioned by some respondents, requires a brief explanation. In a globalized world, remote communication has become a routine. At the UN there has been a limited use of distance or remote interpreting[10]. The dominant

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10.   We understand remote in a broad sense, meaning that interpreters are not in the same room as part (or all) of the primary actors of the communication exercise. Some pilot experiences have been carried out in which interpreters are located away from both the original speakers and

opinion among interpreters regarding remote is mostly negative. The default position is that remote poses all sorts of problems, which *in situ* does not, though most of the negative perceptions expressed by interpreters obviously refer to the latter. People are not necessarily motivated to adapt to technical change. However, it is interesting to note that we have not found any positive correlation, intuitive though it may be, between years of experience –that is, age– and negative attitude or self-positioning towards remote.

> Remote conferences are more frequent; the quality of the sound and the video is mostly good (but contact is sometimes broken off and has to be re-established). [I-23-NY]

6. DISCUSSION

Speed –often associated with a growing frequency of read speeches–, accent, topics and information technologies explain a good deal of the UN interpreters' concerns, pushing them to resort to a variety of actions, including coping strategies.

A series of limitations to this study should be pointed out. First, the drafting of the introduction to the questionnaire referred to previous findings (Baigorri Jalón 2003a) as an indication of the type of information we were expecting, and this may have conditioned the orientation of some of the responses. Secondly, the limited number of replies does not allow for a piece of research based on statistically significant data. Lastly, the high concentration of replies from the UN Headquarters compared to the other duty stations involved (Geneva and Vienna) makes information slanted. These conditions invite to continue this type of research, with a wider scope and a wider subject universe.

If the role of the United Nations interpreters, like that of other professional counterparts, is to produce meaning in one language out of utterances made in other languages, there are specific external variables which need to be taken into account when assessing the end-result of interpreted speeches at the UN. There is an implicit assumption in interpreters' approach to their task: that their users listen all the time and do it attentively. That is why they try to recover as much of the original speech content as possible, even if that means subverting an essential principle: if communication is to be effective, it requires a clear original message and a receiver ready to listen to it. From the views collected from our informants, there are a few factors which emerge as having a prominent impact on their working conditions and thus on their ability to

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the end-users of their interpretation (Moser-Mercer 2005; Viaggio 2011, the latter specifically on UN remote experiments).

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perform their expected tasks in a reasonably professional manner. Among these we have found that a combination of speed, accent –related to the increasing dominance of English as the international organization's *lingua franca* –, topics and information technologies makes up a set of elements which explain to a great extent many of the interpreters' concerns. The current virtually round-the-clock immediate connection seems to create expectations on users of interpreting services which do not always comply with the basic tenets of communication, to the point of putting into question the meaning of concepts such as «speaker», «speech» or «listener», often leading to challenge the delicate balance of Gile's efforts model.

Barghout *et al.* have shown in their experiment that «in the case of speeches delivered at high and extremely high speed, the expert interpreter omits redundant information not essential to the message» (2015: 329), although it may also be the case that at 200 words per minute interpreters are «no longer able to differentiate between main ideas and redundant information as processing has given way to repetition» (*ibid*.: 328).

The response of professional interpreters to change has been and continues to be, as it happens in any given ecosystem –including that of institutions– initial opposition and subsequent adaptation to it. If one compares the job description of a UN old-time interpreter with that of a present-day professional, one would observe that the mechanics of their functions continue to be the same –putting a speech delivered in one language into another– but the context of their performance is quite different, from sound quality to booth ergonomics and from pre-information technology tools to immediate connection to references and other sources. One of the main changes interpreters have undergone at the United Nations and in conference interpreting at large in the last seventy years or so was the replacement of the consecutive by the simultaneous mode. An important difference between the mid-1940s and nowadays is, however, that the profession at that time was still undefined. Skills were taken for granted and specialized training –extensive for other professions– was achieved through practice on the job. In that context, the UN has played throughout its years of existence an important role as an institution which helped to outline the contours of the profession even before the birth of AIIC: the worksite originated the profession, as it was the case in other fields such as social work, librarianship or teaching (Abbott 1988: 80). The yellow and red lights activated by monitors at Nuremberg to warn speakers respectively to slow down or to stop their delivery altogether have now been replaced by a combination of coping measures designed by interpreters to preserve their professional integrity while producing in the target language the most complete version of the original speech.

Even if our study has a limited scope, it may be indicative of trends. One of the positive results is that, according to different participants in our survey, the generational replacement of UN interpreters seems guaranteed. Their selection process remains unchanged, through international competitive examinations –that is, cooptation– but

their training, which now, as opposed to the beginnings, is usually extensive at university level, has incorporated quite naturally information technologies, thus showing the element of flexibility which has characterized professional conference interpreters in their relatively short history[11].

7. A WORD CLOUD IMAGE WITH A COMPOSITE UN INTERPRETERS' ABC IN CAPTIONS

With the use of the following tag-cloud graph we wish to offer an indicative amalgam of the most salient points which distill from our research. We opt for this type of graphic representation, where the more frequently used words are highlighted in larger size, of the qualitative comments obtained from the questionnaire as a useful tool to offer a quick overview of the ideas collected from our informants' responses to open questions (see Cidell 2010; McNaught and Lam, 2010).

We propose a series of comments from our informants presented alphabetically as a sort of extensive caption of an image of the UN interpreting environment.

Accents: far too many non-native speakers use English or French. [I-06-NY; I-14-NY]

Acronyms: they spread like a particularly virulent plague. [I-23-NY]

Actors: More non diplomatic participants from civil society, not used to being interpreted and unaware of what is required of them for us to be able to provide quality interpretation. [I-08-NY]

Booths The booths are bigger and brighter with state-of-the-art equipment. The change has made the working conditions much better and staying in the booth more comfortable. [I-08-NY; I-13-NY; I-16-NY]

11. For an updated reflection on the simultaneous and the remote revolutions see Baigorri-Jalón 2015: 23-24.

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Communication skills: there is a decreasing communication desire or ability. [I-04-NY]

Duration of meetings: Meetings finish on time more often than not: positive effect on quality. [I-05-NY]

Equipment: headphones and booth/ sound equipment have vastly improved. [I-03-NY; I-23-NY]

Generation gap (and relief generation): I find the new/youngster/incoming colleagues to be well-trained, hardworking, dedicated, thorough, and mindful in their preparation and work. This is a delight. [I-07-NY]

ITs: Universal connectivity very useful for good quality interpreting. A major challenge to remain updated at all times about every single news item that surrounds us. Laptop computers– a bane! More and more delegates read from them– hence no printed copies of statements for interpreters– and somehow a text read from a screen seems to be even further from natural speech than one read from a sheet of paper. … The sound interference of cell phones and laptops. [I-01-Geneva; I-03-NY; I-24-Vienna]

Language balance: Very high prevalence of English to the detriment of other official languages. [I-09-NY]

Monitoring the interpreter: At the UN there is also a culture among some delegations to monitor the interpreter as they speak, which results in the speaker having abnormal intonation, in turn making it difficult for the interpreter to do a good job. [I-14-NY]

Read speeches as sight translation: I have only been at the UN for 18 months, before that I was working in Europe as a freelance interpreter. I am struck by how much of our work here at UNHQ involves «sight translation» of texts read at speed by delegates. I think that this is a great shame – it is not true interpreting, and does not facilitate communication. The UN is trying to squeeze in an increasing number of countries in the same amount of time. [I-09-NY; I-13-NY; I-15-NY]

Remote interpreting: Substandard facilities and equipment. Fortunately, due to that factor, remote interpretation has not caught on. [I-18-NY; I-20-NY]

Speakers: I use the term «speakers» very loosely. It means really people who take the floor. [I-06-NY]

Speed: Speed –time is money? –more meetings packed into less time– hence less and less allotted speaking time –often only two or three minutes per delegate– with a clock ticking on-screen for all to see, so the delegate in a race against time speeds up delivery often to the point of stumbling over his words. [I-01-Geneva; I-03-NY; I-15-NY]

Status of interpreter: at the UN […] the job of interpreter is not sufficiently respected. Job status is superior in Europe. [I-14-NY]

Topics: new subject matter and content that include more technical information. [I-17-NY]

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Appendix I: *The questionnaire*

EXTERNAL VARIABLES AND QUALITY IN INTERPRETING AT THE UN (THE INTERPRETERS' VIEW, November 2010)

Please, send your questionnaire to baigorri@usal.es directly or through your booth chief by December 10, 2010. Postal address: Jesús Baigorri-Jalón, Departamento de Traducción e Interpretación, Universidad de Salamanca, Calle Francisco de Vitoria, 6. 37008 Salamanca, Spain.

0. Introduction

Ten years ago I presented a paper at a conference on *Quality in conference interpreting* in which I reflected on how external factors –such as the evolving geopolitical situation, the big UN conferences, an enlarged membership, the presence of the civil society, etc.– had changed UN interpreters' working conditions in the 1990s and how those factors could affect quality as seen from a UN interpreter's booth. A second edition of the conference is taking place in April 2011 and I would like to offer now a general overview on how things have evolved at the UN in these 10 years. In this context, I would ask our colleagues to write a few lines, in English, French or Spanish, expressing their views on how the **external variables** have altered, for better or for worse, their working conditions (for instance, among others, speed of delivery of speeches, read vs. spontaneous speeches, lack of texts of read speeches, new contents and new agendas, new audiences, new accents, information technologies, remote interpreting, equipment and booths, evolution in the relative weight of official languages…). The information contained in the questionnaire will be processed anonymously. For statistical purposes it is necessary to provide data of the following six items. Thank you! Jesús Baigorri-Jalón, University of Salamanca, November 2010.

1. Please, mark as appropriate	0. STAFF 1. FREE-LANCE
2. Please, indicate your duty station	0. NEW YORK 1. GENEVA 2. VIENNA
3. Please, indicate your booth	1. ARABIC 2. CHINESE 1. ENGLISH 2. FRENCH 3. RUSSIAN 6. SPANISH
4. Please, mark as appropriate	0. MALE 1.FEMALE
5. Please, indicate your age group	1. Under 30 2. 30-40 3. 40-50 4. 50-60 5. Over 60
6. Please, indicate number of years of interpreting experience	1. 0-5 2. 5-10 3. 10-15 4. 15-20 5. 20-25 6. 25-30 7. Over 30

7. Please, describe in a few lines (in English, French or Spanish) the changes in the external variables that have contributed to improve or deteriorate the interpreters' working conditions in the last few years.

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Appendix II: *Table of informants quoted in the paper[12]*

	Status	Booth	Gender	Age	Years of experience
I-01-Geneva	Staff	English	Male	50-60	Over 30
I-03-NY	Staff	Spanish	Female	50-60	Over 30
I-04-NY	Staff	Arabic	Male	50-60	25-30
I-05-NY	Free-lance	Spanish	Female	Over 60	Over 30
I-06-NY	Free-lance	Spanish	Female	Over 60	Over 30
I-07-NY	Staff	English	Male	30-40	10-15
I-08-NY	Staff	Arabic	Female	30-40	5-10
I-09-NY	Staff	English	Female	30-40	5-10
I-10-NY	Staff	French	Female	50-60	25-30
I-13-NY	Staff	Russian	Male	40-50	20-25
I-14-NY	Staff	English	Male	40-50	20-25
I-15-NY	Staff	French	Female	Over 60	Over 30
I-16-NY	Free-lance	French	Female	Over 60	Over 30
I-17-NY	Free-lance	English	Female	Over 60	Over 30
I-18-NY	Free-lance	English	Male	Over 60	Over 30
I-19-NY	Free-lance	French	Female	Over 60	Over 30
I-20-NY	Staff	French	Female	50-60	25-30
I-23-NY	Free-lance	English	Male	Over 60	25-30
I-24-Vienna	Staff	English	Male	50-60	20-25

12.   This chart contains only the references of informants quoted in this paper. They are identified according to the code attributed to each respondent in our data base.