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COVID-19 AND INTERPRETATION: MAJOR CHALLENGES AND TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS

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This study aims to explore the state of remote interpretation during the COVID-19 pandemic (with a focus on the pre-pandemic situation as well), including the lockdown, and to survey the best options that could benefit the translators now and, in the future, along with the development of technology. This evaluation of the past and present practices in terms of distance interpretation will provide us with more precise information regarding the prospect of online interpretation with the use of various platforms, including interpreters' resilience building. Our study emphasizes the case of the Republic of Moldova and will cover the period between 2020 and 2022.

Keywords*: interpretation, pandemic, innovation, virtual platforms, restrictions, crisis, language assistance.*

1. Introduction

In March 2020, when the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea to explore the opportunities for online or remote interpretation was revitalised, the focus being on the technology and the innovative tools available that could be used to keep the translation process on during the global health crisis. In the Republic of Moldova, similar to other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted various sectors, including the field of interpretation. The professionals whose activities were disrupted were forced into quarantine with the view to slowing the spread of the virus. Consequently, those professionals switched from the habitual offline working environment to the online mode. Nevertheless, this did not mean that the offline working regime was preserved intact. The transition to the online took its toll on the interpreters. Issues like emotions, stress, poor sound, weak/unstable internet connection, lack of professional equipment, failure to meet certain technical requirements of some remote platforms, speed of discourse, or multilingual events are some of the challenges that providers had to face so far and that this article will elaborate on. Nonetheless, all these difficulties have been fully compensated by the amazing opportunities that translators have had because of the pandemic and due to remote interpretation. Being aware that coronavirus could stay with humanity – become endemic, and therefore, potentially pose less danger over time or, cause another wave, we aim to explore the state of remote interpretation during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the lockdown and survey the best options that could benefit the translators now and, in the future, along with the development of technology. Additionally, the research examines the work conducted by legal interpreters, authorised by the Ministry of Justice and by the freelancers turned into community interpreters during the pandemic, who were switching from online to offline regimes, and had to consider the public health risk (including the restrictions related to COVID-19) on the one hand and the beneficiaries' right to language access on the other hand (in particular after the 24th of February 2022).

2. The Pre-Pandemic World

The evolution of communication technologies has created ample opportunities for distance communication in real-time and has led to alternative ways of delivering interpreting services. One of these, remote interpreting (RI), refers to the use of communication technologies to gain access to an interpreter in another room, building, town, city, or country. In this setting, a telephone line or videoconference link is used to connect the interpreter to the primary participants, who are together at one site [1]. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, one could have thought that interpreters don't use or need a lot of technology, or at least that this is not something they need to provide. And indeed, for consecutive interpretation, one can manage with just a notebook and a pen. As for simultaneous interpretation, the equipment available in the booth and in the conference rooms could have sufficed. For pre-event research and documentation, interpreters could have used their laptops and phones, just like anyone who surfs the Internet. Despite being seen as an opportunity, the development of RSI was not very active in the beginning. Although there was a certain interest in remote interpretation due to the cost reduction possibilities that it could have entailed, the experiments carried out did not lead to much enthusiasm. Up to 2018, remote interpretation was mainly used to provide consecutive interpretation services in areas such as healthcare or law. However, its use in conference interpretation, which implies simultaneous interpretation, was scarce [2, p. 1-12] and the majority of events were more related to videoconferencing, where the interpreters were in the same location as the participants of the meetings or, at least, were working from a physical booth. As an example, in the case of the European Union institutions, mainly the European Commission, several videoconferences were organised using remote interpretation, one of which was the *'Europe for Citizens' Forum*, which linked the Commission Press Room in Brussels and a location in Rhodes. In fact, C. Fantinuoli [2] signalled a technological turn in interpreting well before the pandemic, building on the work of pioneers in this field, such as Moser-Mercer 2005 [3]; Mozourakis 2006 [4]; Roziner and Schlesinger 2010 [5]; and Braun 2015 [1]. Experiments with remote interpreting were emerging in research long before the pandemic, whether in community and court interpreting settings or the medical field. Not surprisingly, already before the pandemic F. Pöchhacker [6] claimed that interpreting had in large part moved to video. Therefore, the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the rapid evolution in the technological area acted as a catalyst not only for improving and extending the features of the existing remote interpretation platforms but also for the development of new ones. All around the globe, there was a focus on using technology in the attempt to make life carry on in a way as similar as possible to how it used to be. This involved being able to organise business meetings and conferences, and thus, the solution to the halt caused by the pandemic meant switching to online. From an interpretation point of view, this enabled clients to continue their activity and interpreters to work and earn a living.

3. The Pandemic

On 11 March 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, while the first case of a confirmed Moldovan infected patient occurred on the 7th of March 2020. All educational institutions in Moldova, including universities, switched to online education on 11 March 2020, whereas offline interpretation events started being cancelled after 9 March 2020. Professional interpreters in Moldova were able to resume their work only in June 2020 due to the technological solutions provided by different companies to ensure that people continue the communication and have access to the information in the language they understand, in the context of healthcare limitations imposed. In the beginning, interpreters had to be either trained and certified or learn individually how to harness the technology and various platforms with the interpretation function, such as Zoom, Kudo, Webster etc. (interpreters had to have sophisticated computers to match some platforms requirements, ISO-compliant headsets with built-in microphones and noise-cancelling features, preferably more than one screen, a very good internet connection, and the latest version of the platform, always test the equipment, the platform and connection before the assignment), while clients had to be clearly explained the differences between RSI and traditional interpreting so that they knew exactly what to

expect and dry runs would usually be needed before events (one day before or one hour ahead of the event). In their turn, clients had to brief the speakers/participants quickly and concisely about RSI, microphones, interpretation channels, speed of discourse, and the work with interpreters online. Moreover, new norms and regulations had to be adopted on the international arena, such as AIIC Interpreter Checklist Performing Remote Interpreting Assignments from Home *in extremis* during the Covid-19 Pandemic (2020), AIIC Reference Guide to Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (2020), ISO/PAS 24019 – Simultaneous interpreting delivery platforms – Requirements and recommendations (2020), and AIIC List of Technical, Practical and Organisational Aspects to Be Considered for Remote Simultaneous Interpretation Platforms (2021). One thing that needs to be highlighted about RSI is that interpreters were effectively being asked to work in substandard conditions and many believe that RSI posed a significant danger of degrading and dehumanising the profession and that organisations seeking to use RSI platforms, needed to be aware that interpreters' work from home is *in extremis*. Under such circumstances, the interpreters had to be exempted from any liability for partial or complete loss of audio, audible artifacts, interruption of service, freezing, or loss of visual input. Event organisers had to be aware that interpreters remain focused for lengthy periods of time, that they are constantly watched by the others and that they need to be vigilant and control the sound/image when not interpreting. Two online small-scale surveys conducted in Moldova during the first half of 2022 revealed that the majority of interpreters were working remotely. This trend, of course, was not limited to our country only. Numerous reports and surveys published in 2021 and 2022 revealed that remote interpreting was a new normal and it was there to stay with the industry. So, COVID-19 changed the landscape irrevocably, forcing the interpretation industry to adjust to digital technology to avoid work disruption.

After over two years of RSI, it is obvious that remote interpretation increases the interpreter's mental workload and leads to fatigue and a decline in performance faster than live interpretation, therefore, it is recommended that the handover occurs after 15 minutes into interpreting instead of 30 minutes. Many simultaneous interpreters allege they are now suffering an array of serious auditory health conditions, including severe tinnitus and acute hyperacusis. Interpreters are dissatisfied with their performance, absence of a co-partner, extra tasks and report an increased level of stress and fatigue. Interpreters mostly need to pay attention to what is happening on the screen (or, two screens), on their phones, to do the handover and exchange messages with the partner. The majority of interpreters also complain of increased drowsiness, anxiety, and trouble concentrating. All of these factors may ultimately lead to a poor-quality interpretation. Moreover, there is a significant increase in the number of headaches that the interpreters complained of when they work in a remote setting**.** Among the challenges that interpreters had to face while performing offline during the pandemic were the masks that hid their face/emotions, and affected their breathing and voice, and subsequently, they needed to speak slower and louder and repeat when necessary and keep the physical distance. Some interpreters would refuse interpreting at police stations, prison facilities, and in courts, while others would reject any offers to go offline at all because of fear and all aforementioned aspects. These aspects represented one of the reasons the courts had switched to online hearings as well. In 2022, a request for information was sent to some Moldovan courts of law aiming at finding relevant data on interpretation, however, only one provided precise figures concerning the work conducted in 2020 and 2021 and based on the data, the number of remote interpretations doubled in 2021 compared to 2020.

Since 24 February 2022, following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Moldovan freelance interpreters, authorised interpreters, and students provided their entire support to the Ukrainian refugees that crossed the border from Ukraine into Moldova. They were employed by various international and national organisations and agencies to provide language services at the border-crossing points upon arrival, at the accommodation centres and at the border-crossing points upon departure, including in Romania. English, French, Romanian, Russian, and Ukrainian were the languages of communication with the authorities and delegations during the crisis. Additionally, online simultaneous interpretation was provided for Ukrainians cooperating with Moldovans and

European projects. Despite their open heart and tremendous help, interpreters faced some challenges during these very hard times, among which, weather conditions, long hours of interpretation, lack of access to meals, toilets, and water, long travel distance, sometimes, fuel paid out of pocket, short-notice assignments (evening calls for the next morning), significantly lower fees (some would work for free), emotional overwhelming, dealing with logistics/calls and multiple languages. Some interpreters claimed they were not employed because of being overqualified.

Conclusions

Despite having mixed opinions of RSI, interpreters declared that during the pandemic they had access to a wider pool of experts, companies, organisations and they could accept more assignments (in parallel or one after another). For instance, Šveda and Djovčoš from Comenius University Bratislava found in their research published in 2022 [7] that within weeks of the outbreak of the first wave in the spring of 2020, interpreters were already beginning to encounter offers for remote interpreting, with the proportion nearly doubling in six weeks. Considering that the technologies/platforms improved a lot during the last two years, interpreters started appreciating them and said they would like to carry on with RSI even if the pandemic ended because of convenience, time, and other positive things that RSI has come along with. Indeed, RSI platforms can be an excellent solution and RSI taught interpreters that they needed to remain focused, control the non-verbal language, pitch, and tone of voice, handle the sound/image when not interpreting and be aware of constant watch by the others. The most important thing to succeed in the new normal was for interpreters to remain resilient and adaptable. In 2023, interpreters are in a much better position than those in 2020, they have more skills and they familiarised themselves quite well with an array of platforms to further offer their services, in particular as hybrid events become more and more popular in some countries, including in Moldova and despite the "zoom fatigue". Thus, in the long run, RSI will remain in high demand and therefore, both students and novice interpreters will have to master this mode of interpretation and the platforms.

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