

Trends in remote interpreting

Interpreting remotely can still be uncertain ground for some of us, but understanding and mastering this skill can bring a host of new opportunities, writes Candelaria Reymundo



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Back in 1990, the late Janet Altman conducted a survey¹ among professional interpreters where she asked them about new developments in the profession. Remote interpreting – a set-up where the interlocutors and the interpreter(s) are not in the same location – was one such development. Some respondents voiced concerns that remote interpreting (RI) could be ‘psychologically damaging’ and that it would inevitably reduce the quality of interpreting. I wonder, if a similar survey was conducted today, almost a quarter of a century later, would interpreters’ answers differ much?

A not-so-new type of interpreting

Quite surprisingly, the advent of RI can be traced back as far as 1957, when the German Postal Service introduced an innovative system whereby a simultaneous interpreter would work remotely to help employees communicate via the telephone with subscribers from abroad. In spite of this, RI is still considered a ‘new’ type of interpreting by many. Certainly, in light of the upsurge in the movement of people across the globe, and thanks to the rapid evolution of new technologies, this unconventional interpreting type is now, more than ever, gaining momentum.

This has led several authors within the interpreting community to ponder whether this new way of interpreting from a distance was born in response to a series of changes in demand, as happened with the transition from consecutive to simultaneous interpreting after the Second World War. At that time, interpreters were used to face-to-face interaction and relied on their notes and their memory to successfully convey long messages after the speaker had finished. However, the need to speed up court proceedings during the Nuremberg trials gave rise to the development of a system that would allow

interpreters to work as they listened to the speaker: simultaneous interpreting (SI). Practitioners were initially reluctant to embrace the changes this interpreting mode brought in terms of working conditions. However, SI is nowadays widely used in conferences and meetings across the globe. In a world of borderless communication, perhaps RI will evolve to become one of the main interpreting types.

But what exactly am I referring to when I say RI? In general, any situation in which the interpreter is not physically present where the communicative event is taking place falls within the scope of RI. The main RI variants are telephone interpreting (over the phone), videoconference interpreting (with a videoconferencing system) and remote conference interpreting (where the interpreter works in the same location as the conference, but in a different room watching a monitor).

The current situation

To date, research into this type of interpreting has mainly focused on feasibility, on the impact of the new conditions on the interpreter’s performance and health, and on the audience’s/participants’ perception². Furthermore, the scope of the studies conducted so far has been confined to conference interpreting in international organisations and to public service interpreting (PSI). But, has RI made its way into the private market?

Answering this question was the main purpose of my MA research project, for which I devised a survey to capture interpreters’ insights into the topic. I decided to focus on Spain and the United Kingdom since I had a particular interest in these countries as markets for future employment. To gather the data, I created an online

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survey for each country and circulated it among professional interpreters. In total, I obtained 68 complete responses from practising interpreters³.

Highlights of the study

Over three quarters of the interpreters consulted had worked remotely during their career. In other words, only 17 interpreters from those surveyed had no RI experience. In addition, over 75% of all respondents showed a positive attitude towards the application of new technologies to the profession in general. However, there seemed to be no correlation between interpreters’ openness to technology and their RI experience.

In terms of the time respondents had been working as interpreters, I obtained an average of around 17 years, but the values ranged from 1 to 50. The UK-based population was somewhat less experienced and younger than the Spain-based population. While the latter did not prove the existence of a relationship between RI experience and interpreters’ age and general experience in the profession, it could be inferred from UK-based respondents’ answers

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that younger and less experienced interpreters had less RI experience than seasoned practitioners.

Taking into account that the younger generation is presumably quite open to and familiar with technology, this finding was, to some extent, striking. The reason behind this might lie in the fact that RI has not yet been embedded into the curricula of interpreting training programmes in Spain or the UK. Consequently, nowadays, young interpreters do not develop the necessary skills to cope with the working conditions that arise from a remote environment and to meet market demand.

Demand for remote interpreters

A number of conclusions could be drawn from my respondents’ answers.

Over three quarters of the interpreters surveyed stated that the share of RI assignments in relation to their total interpreting workload was small, ie it accounted for 1-10%. In fact, 23% of the Spain-based respondents with RI experience and 28% of their UK counterparts had worked remotely only once in the past two years. On the other hand, four interpreters stated that over half of all their interpreting work was done from a distance. As a result, even though there is a real demand for remote interpreters in the Spanish and British private markets, this type of work is still much less common than conventional simultaneous and consecutive interpreting.

Approximately 22% of all respondents said they offered an RI service to their clients. From all the platforms listed by these interpreters, LinkedIn and the CV stand out as the most commonly used.

The most significant divergence between Spain and the UK arose when I examined the main source of RI work. While Spain-based interpreters tend to work remotely for direct clients, UK-based practitioners rely more on agencies. This might be attributable to the fact that Spanish T&I agencies lag behind when it comes to adapting their services to the latest trends in the market.

Figure 1. SPAIN: Main source of RI work

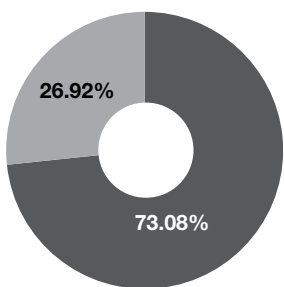
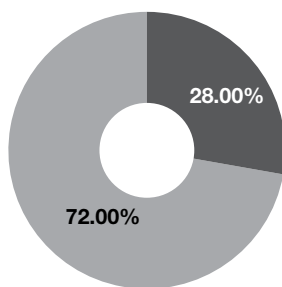


Figure 2. UK: Main source of RI work



With regard to the most commonly used RI variant, results revealed that, considering both populations, telephone

interpreting (TI) dominates the market. Nevertheless, among interpreters based in Spain, videoconference interpreting (VCI) was slightly more frequent than TI, with 65.38% and 61.54% of respondents respectively. It is worth mentioning that TI was the first form of remote work to emerge and the one that has developed the most. Furthermore, the cost and the sophistication of the equipment required for VCI may explain why this RI type is, to date, less common in the private market.

Figure 3. SPAIN: Most common RI variants

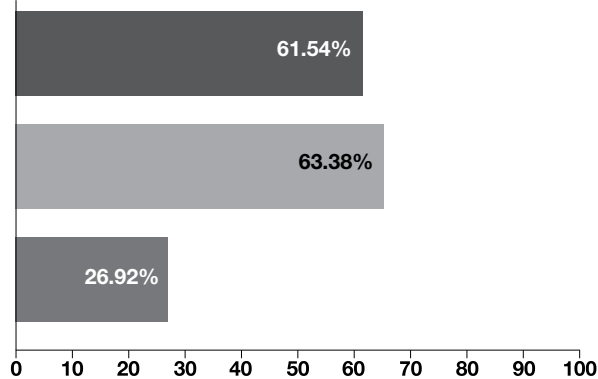
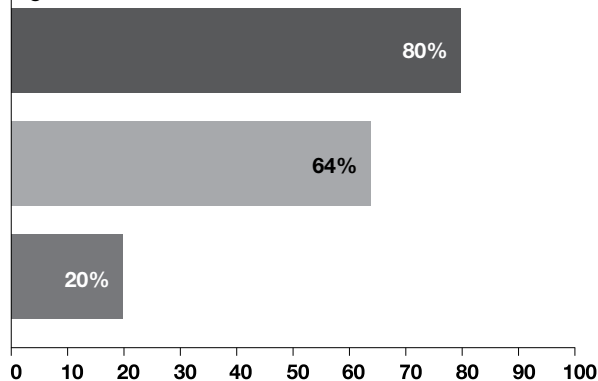


Figure 4. UK: Most common RI variants



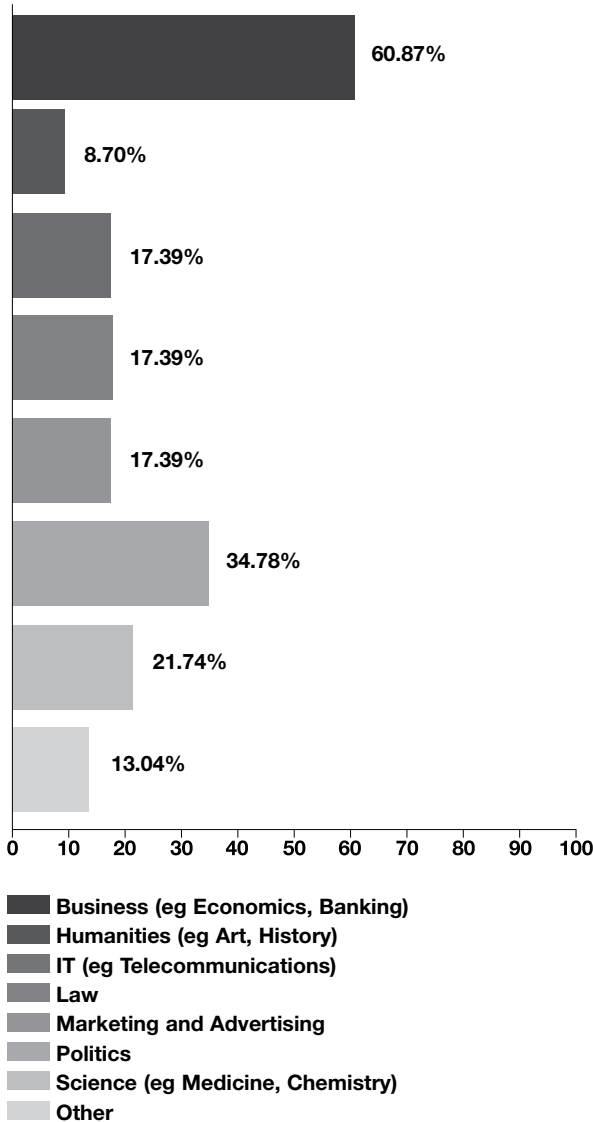
■ Telephone interpreting
 ■ Videoconference interpreting
 ■ Other

On the subject of technological equipment for RI assignments, approximately 70% of the respondents from the Spain survey and 56% of those from the UK survey pointed to the client as the principal provider. This seems to indicate that interpreters do not tend to invest in any devices that can facilitate their work when they interpret remotely. The exception to the rule was one UK-based practitioner who mentioned she used a sound conditioner: ‘It kills all outside noise, makes my room very quiet and is very inexpensive. Besides (...), it reduces stress!’.

The majority of the interpreters surveyed reported RI pay rates to be the same as on-site rates. RI is generally more stressful and less rewarding for interpreters, but, on the other hand, they can save on transport, work attire and other related expenses.

When asked about the most frequent fields of knowledge that come up in RI assignments, interpreters selected business, politics and science, in that order.

Figure 5. Most recurrent fields in RI assignments



In line with this trend, most practitioners in the UK survey selected business-to-business (B2B) as the most common RI set-up in the private market. Spain-based interpreters, however, were divided between B2B (40%) and international conferences (44%). Some respondents also mentioned doing media interpreting for news channels.

The above figures show that the idea of RI outweighing or replacing conventional interpreting types still remains far-fetched. Nevertheless, the fact that there is a real demand in certain settings cannot be overlooked. In fact, the corporate sector is a major source of remote work for interpreters. In the current context of globalisation and internationalisation, where companies know no borders, interpreters who are willing to work remotely have an opportunity to explore this market.

Looking at the reasons as to why 17 of the interpreters consulted had never done RI in the private market, it is worth noting that 12 of them had never been asked to work remotely. Nine of these stated they would be willing to try working from a distance, while the other three were not certain they would accept remote working conditions.

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In addition, 30% of Spain-based and around 11% of UK-based practitioners without RI experience pointed out that they preferred traditional set-ups because they were not familiar with this interpreting type. This shows that, surprisingly, RI is still a grey area for some interpreters.

Satisfaction and stress

With regard to interpreters’ satisfaction and their perception about clients’ satisfaction, the results of my survey tally with the findings of previous studies: clients seem to be quite satisfied with the outcome, but interpreters in general feel that their performance deteriorates when working remotely. In spite of this, the majority of respondents stated they were satisfied overall.

On the related matter of stress, over half of respondents from each survey admitted stress levels were higher when working remotely. When asked if this issue could be addressed through training, again over half answered negatively. This shows that practitioners’ concerns about RI are not solely related to the technology used in this type of interpreting. As I mentioned earlier, interpreters were likewise reluctant to work from a booth (in SI) when they were used to interacting directly with the interlocutors (in consecutive interpreting). Perhaps the profession simply needs more time to adapt to the new circumstances.

A friend or a foe?

For RI to gain ground as an interpreting set-up, an overarching framework of standards and working conditions should be established. Despite the attempt of several associations and institutions (AIIC, the European Court of Justice and the Joint Interpreting and Conference Service, among others) to do so with the Code for the use of new technologies in conference interpretation⁴ over ten years ago, many interpreters are still deterred from RI due to the uncertainty surrounding its practice.

That is why understanding the trends in RI can help practitioners adapt to the new circumstances in a modern world where, as linguists, technology must be our friend, not our foe. RI brings new opportunities that we shouldn’t squander, as they will drive the industry forward and allow us to tap into unexplored market areas. ©

¹ ‘What helps effective communication? Some interpreters’ views’ in *The Interpreter Newsletter* 3 pp.23-32.

² Bibliography on videoconference and remote interpreting available at www.videoconference-interpreting.net.

³ The data gathered through both surveys conducted in my research project involved a limited number of interpreters and, therefore, these results cannot be applied to all the members of the interpreting community.

⁴ Available at www.aiic.net.