Remote interpreting rides again

Recently I came across an article in Le Soir announcing that the University of Mons had come up with a new video interpreting system, and saying that unlike past attempts, this one really works. Let’s take a look behind the PR and see what we really have here.

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The Article

I prefer to reproduce the article in full so that the reader can have it at hand when reading my comments.

"L’UMons crée la visio-interprétation"

Technologie Première mondiale

Une première mondiale. Rien de moins. C’est ce qu’a présenté ce mardi le Centre d’études et de recherche multimédia (Cerm) de la Faculté de traduction et d’interprétation (FTI) de l’UMons. Ce coup de force a pour nom la visio-interprétation, autrement dit : l’interprétation à distance. Déjà tentée par Philips dans les années 80, elle n’avait pas abouti. Ici, c’est un succès, notamment grâce à un partenariat avec l’Organisation des Nations unies et un autre avec l’entreprise 3GSP.

Une nouveauté qui tombe à pic, comme le confirme le secrétaire général adjoint de l’ONU, le Dr Shaaban M. Shaaban. « Partout dans le monde, nous subissons une pénurie d’interprètes et de traducteurs, affirme-t-il. L’ONU, comme l’Union européenne, est particulièrement touchée. Nous sommes victimes du papy-boom et 40 % de nos interprètes vont partir à la retraite d’ici quelques années. Ce qui nous affecte aussi est une conséquence de la mondialisation avec un resserrement des liens régionaux via des organisations qui ont grand besoin d’interprètes. »

Partie de ce constat, l’ONU a anticipé. Avec ses six langues officielles (anglais, chinois, russe, espagnol, arabe et français), elle ne pouvait risquer de se retrouver sans interprètes. « Nous avons lancé un programme à la suite duquel 19 universités disposant d’une faculté d’interprétation, dont Mons, ont signé un mémorandum de collaboration », précise le secrétaire général adjoint.


En parallèle, l’UMons s’est voulu créative. Pour pallier le manque, elle a développé un autre projet : l’interprétation à distance. « Le système permet de faire appel à des interprètes professionnels sans qu’ils ne soient contraints de se trouver sur les lieux de l’événement », précise le professeur
Hayssam Safar, du Cerm.

Finalement assez simple, le mécanisme réside dans une boîte composée de douze pièces de bois assemblées par des pièces en polymère. Un concept qui empêche le son de réfléchir sur les parois. Le tout est posé sur le bureau. L’interprète y installe ensuite son ordinateur, sa caméra, son micro et son boîtier à commandes. Sur son écran, il voit l’orateur et les éventuels autres interprètes avec qui il travaille.

« Les avantages sont multiples, se réjouit le professeur Safar. Le système est déployable facilement. Il offre une grande qualité de son et d’image tout en évitant la claustrophobie chez l’utilisateur qui peut aussi visualiser la gestuelle de l’orateur. Surtout, il évite à l’interprète de perdre du temps en voyageant. Il peut ainsi travailler plus et de façon plus rentable. Le coût est aussi moindre pour l’institution qui a recours à l’interprète. De surcroît, on préserve l’environnement en réduisant les voyages en avion et donc les émissions de CO2. »


Reste maintenant à convaincre les utilisateurs potentiels. A voir les sourires du Dr Shaaban M. Shaaban, l’ONU, elle, est déjà conquise.”[1]

Impressions

I mulled this over for quite a while before sitting down to put my thoughts on paper. I have wonderful memories of my experience as an external examiner for finals at Mons and other fine European schools, and systematically marveled at the quality of their students. Many (a few of them Mons graduates) had done stints in the silent booth at the UN Vienna when I was working there, and some got their first – to boot, international! – contracts with us two months after graduating. Many went on to become successful freelancers or UN staff interpreters, even though no formal memorandum had been signed at that time.

But the article (in all probability due to the journalist’s uninformed enthusiasm and not to the University putting forward false claims) credits Mons with the invention of powder. Back in 1978 I took part in remote interpreting trials at the Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries in Buenos Aires, during which RI was successfully offered from New York (sound only, no image), and later at the UNISPACE Conference in Vienna in 1982 – well nigh thirty years ago! – at which RI was again tried (this time with image as well as sound) between the Soviet cosmonauts on board de MIR space station and the conference room at the Hofburg, with the spacemen showing us around the station – and it worked wonderfully.

Much less successful were the rather wasteful experiments in Vienna in 1999 and New York in 2001, where the idea was not a simple link with an absentee speaker to audience and interpreters sitting together in a regular conference room, but having UN staff – n.b., not freelance – interpreting away from the conference venue (so as not to waste their time and the Organisation’s money travelling), which proved a hell of a difference and the Achilles heal of the endeavour. The technical problem at that time was in fact financial: ISDN (broad band was considered too costly) could not ensure adequate synchronisation between image and sound (more about the psychological hurdles below). The report[2] is available and the new RI pundits would do well to to read it, as well as the torrent of academic analyses it gave rise to (mostly accessible nowadays through a simple Google search)[3].

Incidentally, shortly after that fiasco, at the following meeting of the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP), then Under-Secretary
General Federico Riesco commented wryly that “remote interpreting is the answer to a problem we do not have.” Be that as it may, the UN must be at it yet again.

Of course having RI as part of interpreter training is not at all a bad thing: ideally any professional should be trained to face as many foreseeable situations as possible – it would be very bad for patients and doctors alike if physicians were not trained in new technologies, including “remote” surgery allowing eminent specialists to participate and offer help from a distance during an operation. The big difference here is that such training aims to benefit patients (and indeed physicians themselves, who might otherwise not benefit from such exchanges), not insurers or private hospitals, much as they might collateral benefit from it.

Whatever its holy and unholy uses, technology is surely unstoppable, and professions, trades and, generally speaking, skills cannot but follow suit. That the development of technology and the evolution of jobs, trades and professions is automatically good for professionals, tradesmen and workers is, on the other hand, moot. If technological development means, together with a higher productivity of human labour, a corresponding increase in remuneration, improvement in working conditions, reduction of working hours, increase in work satisfaction, as well as more and better-quality leisure time, then technology serves what ought to be its beneficial purposes. But if such development simply means an even higher concentration of wealth on the one hand, and lower wages and rampant un- and under-employment on the other, then I submit something is definitely wrong.

A closer look

But let us return to the assertions. First of all we should distinguish the writer’s lay opinions from those put forward by professionals.

« Un des objectifs est attirer les étudiants vers l’interprétation. Créer des vocations et montrer que les débouches existent. »

No offence intended, but to me this is at best naïve. How can remote interpreting – the prospect of not having to travel – “attract”, let alone “inspire” (I presume that is what “créer des vocations” means in human parlance), more would-be interpreters? What need is there to show that there are, indeed, “prospects” – much less that remote interpreting is there to provide them, especially in view of the fact that, according the Under-Secretary General, “there is a paucity of translators and interpreters the world over”?

« Le mécanisme réside dans une boîte composé de douze pièces de bois assemblées par des pièces en polymère... Le tout est posé sur le bureau. L’interprète y installe en suite son ordinateur, son caméra, son micro et son boîtier à commandes. Sur son ordinateur il voit l’orateur et les éventuels autres interprètes avec qui il travaille. ‘Les avantages sont multiples... Le système est deployable facilement. Il offre une grande qualité de son et d’image tout en évitant la claustrophobie qui peut aussi visualiser le gestuelle de l’orateur’. [4]

How can the interpreter see (again, I presume that is what “visualiser” means) on a regular PC screen the speaker and (in the case of the UN) all other thirteen colleagues in his team? All interpreters in both UN RI pilot projects, working together in the same conference room and in constant contact with each other, complained collectively of alienation. Now, it seems, an interpreter – nay, a student – working alone inside a Euclidean dodecahedron feels just fine.

« Surtout il évite à l’interprète de perdre du temps en voyageaient. Il peut aussi travailler plus et d’une façon plus rentable. Le cout est aussi moindre pour l’institution qui a recours à l’interprète. De surcroit on préserve l’environnement en réduisant les voyages en avion et donc les émissions de CO₂. »
I shall not linger on the somewhat silly eco-friendly part of the spiel except to point out that this concern is much better catered to by remote attendance by delegates: they outnumber us at least one hundred to one. More seriously, how can anybody minimally acquainted with the profession as we know it today assert so blithely that interpreters “waste” their time travelling? We are duly paid for it! Remove the need for travel and you simply chop off remuneration. And contrary to the assertion in the article, we would not work a second more. We would, on the other hand, be working more profitably indeed… for our employers. Which makes it at the very least disingenuous to comment en passant that “the cost is also lower for the institution”: it is lower exclusively for the institution!

Chief Interpreter that I was for fifteen years, I can fully understand employers wishing to cut corners, but hearing a professional interpreter, or worse, a trainer of professional interpreters, state that RI is a bonus to practitioners defies comprehension. Also, if from a strictly financial point of view, one can indeed say that travel time is “wasted” (pretty much as postage for an item bought from a catalogue), professionally this “waste” is hardly such: To a great extent, the prowess of an international interpreter – the exact kind that any international organisation is interested in – is a function of his multi-culturality, and such multi-culturality is, to a great extent, a function of his travelling to service conferences all over the world. That ought to be obvious to any educated employer and even more so to a trainer. But there is more: an interpreter’s ability is also a function of his constant contact with colleagues and direct users of his services, i.e. speakers and interlocutors, and to a lesser degree managers and recruiters. An employer may be excused from realizing this but not a trainer! Moreover, the ability to interact with participants, conference servicing staff and managers sur place is, as we all know, crucial for a smooth, efficient performance of interpreters as a team and, therefore, the service as a whole – yet another thing both employers and trainers must be aware of.

Lastly, who is going to furnish such devices to interpreters – and pay for them! Are organisations and, especially, less momentous and definitely greedier employers, going to distribute them to interpreters scattered all over the world? Will they then ask interpreters to ship them back? I doubt it. As I see it, employers will expect (read demand) that interpreters purchase the devices themselves and have them installed and in working order lest they otherwise not be recruited. Once the system becomes more or less widespread, the next inevitable step is a savage bidding war, which, as in the case of translation, will end up in internecine squabbling and plummeting professional fees to the inevitable benefit of the most incompetent and venal, causing untold damage to the profession as a whole.

Moreover, physical isolation breeds social, psychological and definitely professional isolation. Physical isolation divides us, and divided we fall. If employers do not know it (my lower neck!), we most certainly do. Professional interpreters that they ought to be, trainers should make it their duty to warn students of such threats to the profession since this is also part of their “preparation for professional life.”

To sum up, then, am I saying that schools should refuse to train our future colleagues in remote interpreting? Of course not: I am not a Chartist. It is not technology that frightens me but the use it is put to in the pursuance of the naked financial interests of employers, and not those of direct users or practitioners. Our future colleagues ought, indeed, to be trained for all eventualities. But training institutions should be the last ones to try and sell RI to them – if nothing else, because it amounts to selling them.

As we say in Argentina: among dentists let us not pretend it won’t hurt.


Geneva: United Nations, Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. The second experiment, held in New York, with a full control team of interpreters sitting in the meeting’s conference room and the “remote” team in a different room a few feet away did not even warrant the trouble and expense of its own report.

[3] The EU, by the way, had their own experiment shortly thereafter – with, if I am not mistaken, similar results.

[4] The device can be seen on this page of the UMons’s site, where this explanation also stands out: « L’interprète travaillant de son bureau ou de son domicile n’importe où dans le monde est libéré des contraintes liées aux déplacements. Le réseau offre une grande flexibilité et une disponibilité optimisée. Cette solution offre aux clients finaux une solution de haute qualité, minimisant les contraintes d’organisation. L’interprète bénéficie d’une grande souplesse de fonctionnement, qu’il souhaite travailler en temps partiels, en combinaison avec d’autres activités ou simplement comme activité principale. » In other words, it is suitable even for professional interpreters.

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