ICT in Conference Interpreting

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Abstract

Computers, new technologies, and in particular electronic tools – in other words, information and communication technology (ICT) – have made their way to impact profoundly our daily lives since the last few years of the twentieth century, and much more so in these first six years of the twenty-first century. The way of performing our work in every field has changed radically because of them. It is undeniable, however, that some professions have been affected to a larger extent than others. This difference provides the point of departure for a diachronic overview and then a synchronic study of the role of new technologies in conference interpreting, both simultaneous and consecutive.
In the light of this, a survey of the use of new technologies and electronic tools by conference interpreters provides a necessary descriptive study, as a basis for a larger study on the use of new technologies and electronic tools by conference interpreters. The aim of this paper thus seeks to identify which of these tools and technologies are the core tools to be taught to students of conference interpreting in order to facilitate their insertion in the labour market. Within conference interpreting, we also intend to present the use of ICT in different domains in order to explain how separate specialties in the same profession can differ in their needs, preparation and performance.

Key words: new technologies, conference interpreting, interpreting domains.

Diachronic overview

In order to understand and appreciate the role of new technologies in conference interpreting, a historical perspective is necessary. We are taking here the term 'new technologies' in its broadest sense, meaning innovative technologies of various kinds (Stoll 2002:1), and the term 'technologies' as any means applied to improve the practice.

Histories of translation mention that the first form of translation was undoubtedly interpreting, sometimes called *oral translation* (García Yebra 1994: 28). Interpreting has long been acknowledged in writing: as early as 3000 BC the Egyptians already had a hieroglyphic for the activity of "interpreting". Interpreters are mentioned in the Bible, as Herbert (1952:1) notes, in Job and in Corinthians. Today it continues to be the most direct form of communication between two languages.

In spite of the above, it was translators who began to use new inventions early on, with the shift from hieroglyphics to alphabetical writing around five thousand years ago (García Yebra 1994: 12). Innovations continued not only with the method followed, but also with the

materials translators worked with, as it went from writing on ephemeral materials such as leaves, wood, and clay, to more permanent and practical ones such as copper and stone and later on parchment. Of undeniable importance for translation was the introduction of paper, a Chinese invention. It came first to Baghdad at the end of the eighth century, and was brought later to Europe through the Iberian Peninsula in the mid-thirteenth century during the regime of Alfonso X (Pym 2000: 80-81). The method used for translations in the Toledo School has been carefully studied by various scholars, among them Menéndez Pidal (1999: 68-69). In his description, we can identify a step that corresponds to a kind of inverse consecutive interpreting or a sight translation combined with translation from an oral text: a specialist in the source language (generally Arab) would translate the written text orally into the vernacular language (Romance), and another specialist would transcribe the oral text in writing in the target language (Latin).

Despite sporadic references to interpreters and interpreting by several authors of ancient times, a first recognition of the profession, together with the norms to ensure the availability of good interpreters, did not come until the Renaissance. This was due to the emergence of the interest of the humanists in foreign languages and because of the great European expeditions of the time, which led to contact with new languages and thus raised awareness of the value of a good interpreter.

But it was translation that received the next extraordinary boost, both technologically and quantitatively, as a result of the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the fifteenth century. Then again it underwent another very important change with the introduction of the typewriter in the 1870s, due to the role the machine played in the development of modern business. However, these two important introductions in writing technology did not change how interpreting is done even today. The only major change in interpreting in all that time, if we may say so, would have been the introduction of dictionaries around the 7th century BC in Assyria.

Consecutive and whisper interpreting (*chuchotage*) went on basically unchanged for hundreds of years until the first major step in the profession: the appearance in the twentieth century of equipment for simultaneous interpreting which helped have a true and explicit recognition of the interpreting profession and of the need for training for it. This was the first major technical solution for interpreting, which required special skills and specific training from the professionals. It emerged because of the concrete needs of the League of Nations. Due to the many languages involved in each plenary session, it was necessary to reduce the time for interpreting, which with the consecutive method had become cumbersome when there were more than two languages. The system, invented by Edward Filene, a Boston entrepreneur, and his partner Finlay, and developed by IBM, was first used at an International Labour Conference in Geneva in 1927. As revolutionary as it was, simultaneous interpreting was curtailed, as the League of Nations was facing enormous problems during the years before World War II. This proved to be a major setback for the profession for around 20 years. Simultaneous interpreting (SI) resurfaced for the Nuremberg Trials, and became the form *par excellence* of conference interpreting when in 1947 the United Nations adopted Resolution 152(11), by which simultaneous interpreting was instituted as a permanent service. (Bowen *et al.* 1995: 246-252; Codina 2006; and Roland 1999: 9-155).

It is only now, almost 60 years later, that we are witnessing the next truly radical step for the profession of the conference interpreter (CI), with the use of computers and new technologies, although one of the latter, remote interpreting, is not as new as we are led to believe: the UN already experimented with it in the seventies as Baigorri states (Codina 2006), but only today it is regarded as a real possibility.

Synchronic study of the role of ICT in conference interpreting

ICT have been differentiated by Torres del Rey (2005: 110) into information technology (represented by software and hardware) and communications technology (represented

basically but not only by the Internet). Within these, the two ICTs that have dramatically changed the working environment of the interpreter are remote interpreting (communications) and virtual learning environments (information) (Moser-Mercer 2005).

Enríquez and Austermühl (2003: 227) developed a typology for translation and localization technology, with an approach that reflects the needs that arise during the different phases of the translation process. We shall try to mirror their typology regarding what they denominate "knowledge tools", which are the ones that can be useful for, and are actually used by, conference interpreters (CIs). We are combining this with Melby's (1998: 1) organization of translation tool functions by introducing interpreter training, and how ICT can help reduce the efforts identified by Gile in his Efforts model (Gile 1997/2002: 163-176). In Figure 1 we have grouped them into Interpreting Tools, Training Tools and what we have called Mode Tools, under which we have classified all distance interpreting.

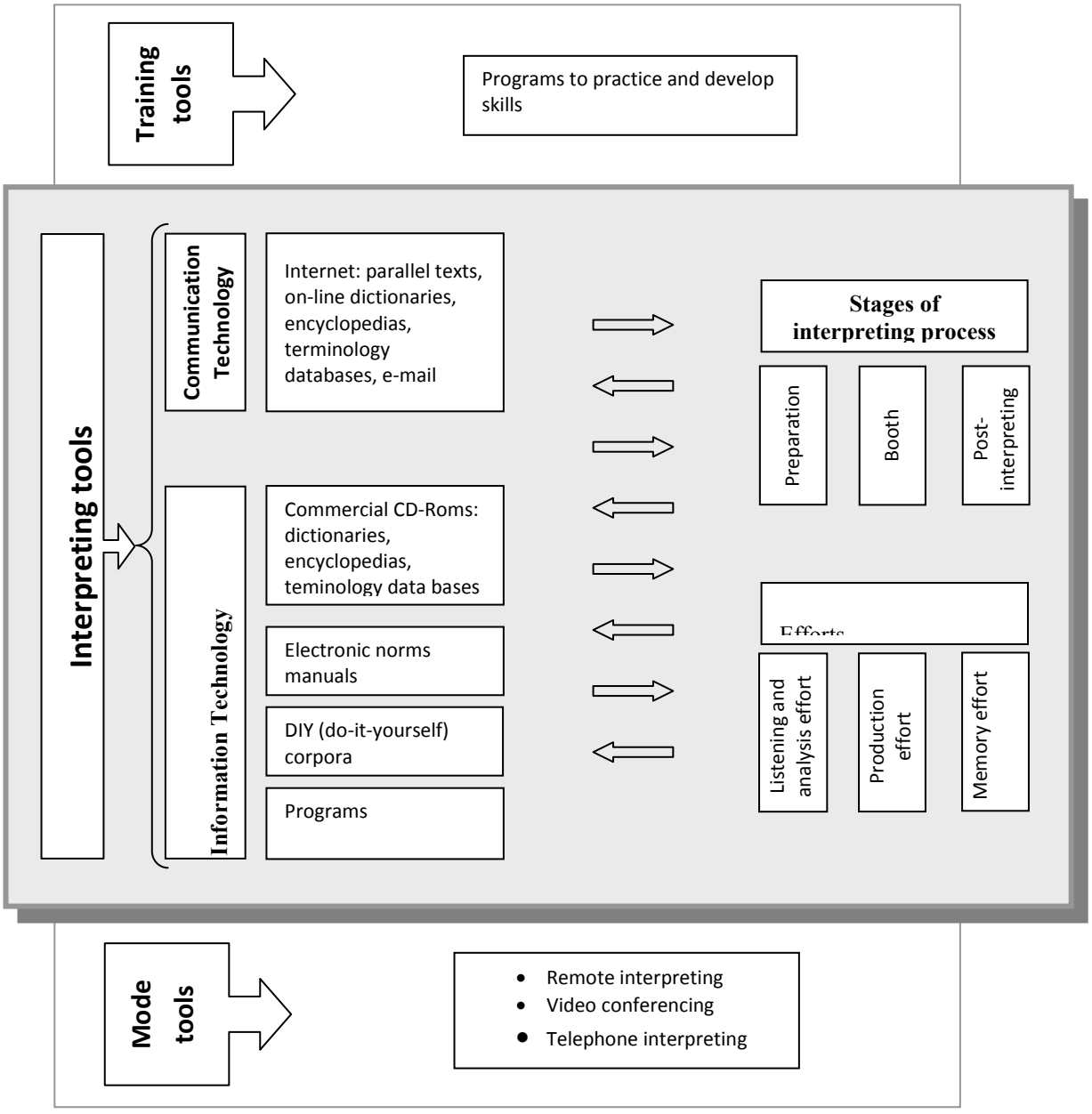

Figure 1 – A typology of ICTs in relation to the stages of the interpreting process and the effort(s) they can benefit.

The following are a few examples of programs or tools (some of which may not necessarily be available commercially, but are in the process of commercialization or of development), with the tasks and stages of the interpreting process they are associated with.

- Training tools: *Blackbox* program, *Interpr-It* program, *IRIS* database, *Interpretations* program, all mentioned by Sandrelli (2003 and 2005), and *DigiLab* (Stoll 2002:5).
- Information technology programs and tools for terminology and knowledge management and development: terminology databases, DIY corpora, voice-recognition programs, *LookUp © Professional, WevSleuth*, and it is reported that interpreters also use translation-related terminology systems such as *Trados Multiterm®* (Stoll 2002: 3), *Glossary, Word* tables (Stoll 2005).
- Information technology information and communication tools, used mainly, but not exclusively, for pre- and post-interpreting work: Internet resources such as parallel texts, e-mail, on-line dictionaries and encyclopedias (several of which can be used simultaneously in a parallel search with systems like the *PC-library ® of Langenscheidt* [Stoll 2002:4], CD-Rom dictionaries and encyclopedias.
- Mode tools: remote interpreting, video-conferencing, telephone interpreting, notation systems.

In Figure 1, we discuss new technologies and electronic tools, so we must try to give as clear definitions as possible of these concepts.

For our purposes, from this point on "new technologies" are all the aids meant to improve the process, preparation, or function of the product of the interpreter that are not used with or available within the computer. They are external, such as cameras, audio-visual recorders, television, mobile telephones, microphones, headphones, and pocket electronic dictionaries (not connectable to the computer, but independent), including wireless technologies.

"Electronic tools" are all the aids meant to improve the process, preparation, or function of the product of the interpreter that are used or available within the computer or through Internet, such as on-line dictionaries, encyclopedias, search engines, CD-ROMs whether commercial or do-it-yourself (DIY), and remote and video-conferencing.

We have undertaken a survey, which, given the amount of replies received (59) and having representatives from five continents, we feel has given us a meaningful sample that provides insight of the present use of new technologies and electronic tools in the profession.

We had respondents from 22 countries: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Luxembourg, Mexico, Palestine, Spain, Switzerland, UK, and USA. The majority of our respondents come from Finland (18), while we had only one representative from most of the other countries. The reason is not as direct as one could think. The same questionnaires were sent to national associations of various countries, but Finns were particularly active in forwarding it to colleagues or in providing addresses of CIs they considered would be willing to participate in the study. This presents a problem when trying to analyze the differences of usage according to geographical locations, but we are showing the answers in percentages in order to overcome this inconvenience.

Table 1 shows that the largest group of respondents is from Western countries (EU-countries, new EU-countries, North America) with 75 % of the replies, followed by Latin America and non-EU countries, with 19 % of the replies. It should be noted that we have a total of 102 % because of the approximations of each percentage.

Table 1 – Distribution of respondents by regions.

Regions with countries represented	Percentage of total replies (59)
Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, 7 respondents in all)	12 %
North America (USA and Canada, 4 respondents in all)	7 %
EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Spain, UK, 37 respondents in all)	63 %
New EU countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, 3 respondents in all)	5 %
Non-EU countries (Croatia, Switzerland, 4 respondents in all)	7 %
Oceania (Australia, 1 respondent)	2 %
Asia (Japan, 1 respondent)	2 %
Asia Minor (Palestine, 1 respondent)	2 %
Africa (Kenya, 1 respondent)	2 %

Although Finns were a majority of respondents, Finnish language ranked second, but it is only natural because English is one of the working languages for most interpreters today: 48 respondents had English as one of their working languages, that is, 81 %.

We had 38 replies to the question of which ICT interpreters should master to be considered as potential candidates to be hired. The question asked for ranking the ICT required from a potential candidate from the most important (1) to the least important (4). Since some of the respondents just marked 'X' without ranking, we eliminated their answers because they could not be classified. Others continued the ranking after 4, so we have eliminated those responses from the table as well, leaving us with 29 valid responses from which Table 2 has been drawn.

There was no consensus about one single ICT being the most important that potential interpreters should master, but if we average the replies and convert them to a percentage, then the most important was 'internet resources' as an entire category including parallel texts, dictionaries, encyclopedias, terminology data bases, with an average of 7 responses, which represent 24 % of the total 29. Electronic norms manuals were marked always as being the least priority. Interestingly enough, DIY corpora received both top priority and least priority, although with a tendency to have more supporters as a priority.

Among the comments made by the respondents was that in one instance potential interpreters were left at their discretion to decide whether they used modern or classical tools and in two other cases the answers were "knowing how to use tools is not a pre-requisite", and "if the results are good the means are not considered important". These comments may show that usage and mastering of tools are not yet considered as essential training in the labour market.

Table 2 – Ranking of electronic tools potential interpreters should master.

Tool	Order of importance 1 Most important	2	3	4 Least important
	Number of replies with the corresponding ranking (Percentage of 29 respondents to the question)			
Internet resources	14 (48 %)	4 (14 %)	1 (3 %)	1 (3 %)
Parallel texts	8 (28 %)	6 (21 %)	7 (24 %)	-
On-line dictionaries	5 (17 %)	5 (17 %)	7 (24 %)	2 (7 %)
On-line encyclopedias	-	2 (7 %)	2 (7 %)	10 (34 %)
On-line terminology data bases	8 (28 %)	7 (24 %)	3 (10 %)	2 (7 %)
Electronic norms manuals	-	-	-	3 (10 %)
DIY corpora	5 (17 %)	5 (17 %)	3 (10 %)	2 (7 %)
CD-ROMs (comm.)	-	1 (3 %)	5 (17 %)	4 (14 %)
CD-R dictionaries	4 (14 %)	-	3 (10 %)	3 (10 %)
CD-R encyclopedias	1 (3 %)	2 (7 %)	1 (3 %)	2 (7 %)
CD-R terminology data bases	-	4 (14 %)	1 (3 %)	3 (10 %)
Remote interpreting	-	-	2 (7 %)	4 (14 %)
Video-conferencing	3 (10 %)	-	-	1 (3 %)
Telephone conferencing	1 (3 %)	1 (3 %)	-	2 (7 %)

Domains in conference interpreting

We were interested to see how practicing interpreters regard the domains and settings where they work. We asked the CIs about concrete settings (defined below), and also let them add their own settings, in order to see to what extent they agree with the clear and general division of domains proposed by AUSIT (2005: 7-8) (Business, Community, Diplomatic). Their responses are recorded in Table 2.

Marzocchi and Zucchetto (1997: 70-72) reviewed and discussed the notion that different settings and institutions require different skills and training from interpreters. Following their idea and our own experience in our work in international conferences where we made our first observations regarding diplomatic rhetoric, although not as interpreters, we have chosen to present the diplomatic domain as one with special requirements of electronic tools and resources. We also chose the diplomatic domain because it represents one of the most important sources of employment for interpreters, and because its history is closely related to the history of interpreting.

The term ‘diplomatic’ is an adjective used when talking about one of the three domains of the translation and interpreting market, according to AUSIT (2005: 7-8). An important observation that will help us introduce the diplomatic domain is made by Cohen (2004) in his definition of negotiation: "So much of negotiation involves arguments about words and concepts that it cannot be assumed that language is secondary and all that ‘really’ counts is

the ‘objective’ issues at stake". This argument illustrates the main difference between this domain and others.

Table 3 – CIs working in the different domains, fields or settings.

Domain, field or setting	No. of respondents	Percentage of total respondents
Business (trade & commerce)	51	86 %
Politics	42	71 %
Technology	33	56 %
Others (see below for details)	30	51 %
Diplomatic	29	49 %
Environment	26	44 %
Science	22	37 %
Medicine	22	37 %

Other fields mentioned: culture, arts, fisheries, agriculture, education, social sciences, social issues, employment, law, EU-related fields, financial, economy, computer science, defence, corporate, films & live TV broadcasts, health, history, international organizations, foodstuffs, trade union issues, public service interpreting, advertising, grassroots meetings, NGOs, youth, IT, transport, quality and leadership, disability.

The diplomatic domain can be defined as any translation or interpreting work that takes place in a meeting or conference between official government representatives of a sovereign state, and at least one of the following parties: delegates or representatives of another sovereign state, an international NGO, a delegation, or a mission. The field may be trade or business, treaty negotiations, international aid and development, military or intelligence gathering activities, etc. As can be seen, it is not the subject which defines whether it is a diplomatic situation or not. It is the power structures, the definitions of success, and the mechanism of accountability that mark the limits of the domain (AUSIT 2005: 7-8).

Table 3 also shows that Business (trade & commerce) is the main employment source for CIs, followed fairly closely by Politics. Although we find the diplomatic domain is only fifth in rank in our table, it still proves that it is an employment source for 49% of the total respondents.

In Table 4 we intend to show to what extent the usage of ICTs differ between the diplomatic domain and the other more general domains.

As can be observed in Table 4, there is a clear difference between the usage of electronic tools in the diplomatic domain and in other domains. In average, diplomatic interpreters use 18 % less electronic tools than their counterparts in other domains. The only higher percentage in the use of these tools by CIs working in the diplomatic domain is in electronic norms manuals (5 % more), which can be consistent with the belief that CIs working for international organizations which hold diplomatic meetings need to comply more strictly with certain norms. It should be noted that regarding the "other" types of electronic tools or new technologies, there were neither replies nor clarifications in the section regarding usage of tools in the diplomatic domain.

In all, these figures confirm our premise, that conference interpreting in the diplomatic domain has different needs. We can assume that tools are needed less, while knowledge and experience are more important in choosing the right nuance, a characteristic that should be taken into account also in training programs. The good news is that tools and new technologies can help out in the future the professional CIs in finding the vital words to avoid fatal mistakes that could possibly change the course of history, or at least change the mood of a diplomatic meeting (Robbins 2005).

Table 4 – Electronic tools and new technologies: general usage compared to usage in diplomatic domain.

I C T s	General usage		Usage in diplomatic domain	
	Users	% of total (56)	Users	% of total (26)
Internet resources (as a whole)	47	83 %	17	65 %
Dictionaries	41	73 %	9	35 %
Parallel texts	44	79 %	15	58 %
Encyclopedias	22	39 %	8	31 %
Terminology data bases (glossaries)	42	75 %	16	62 %
Electronic norms manuals	4	7 %	3	12 %
DIY (do-it-yourself) corpora	34	61 %	11	42 %
CD-ROMs (commercial) (as a whole)	18	32 %	4	15 %
CD-Rom dictionaries	26	46 %	2	8 %
CD-Rom encyclopedias	8	14 %	2	8 %
CD-Rom terminology data bases (glossaries)	5	9 %	2	8 %
Remote interpreting (as a whole)	12	21 %	1	4 %
Video conferencing	15	27 %	4	15 %
Telephone interpreting	10	18 %	2	8 %
Others	13	23 %	--	–

Conclusions

As core tools to be taught to future interpreters, we have seen repeatedly that Internet resources as a whole (63 %) come in first place, while DIY-corpora could be considered as a second priority (17 %), CD-R dictionaries as a third (14 %), and video-conferencing with 105 should at least be tried, if not mastered. As for future diplomatic interpreters, besides the above, electronic norms manuals should be introduced as there is a higher possibility of having to use them in that domain.

In general, it can be said that ICTs -- new technologies and electronic tools -- are not only gaining great popularity, but are becoming the standard for professional CIs as Baigorri notes (Codina 2006). As one enthusiastic respondent said, "anyone unable to make the most of what these tools have to offer will be less competitive in the market", which brings us to the conclusion that knowing the attitude and usage of CTIs by practicing CIs can aid trainers to identify which are indispensable to teach today or in the near future, since we can see that this is an aspect that cannot be overlooked any further in order to keep the future of the profession bright.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in Mexico City with a mother who founded one of the pioneering bilingual schools there and a father with a French-American grandmother, languages have always been a very active part of my life. Diplomacy, too, has been one of my great interests, as I studied International Relations and worked for the Canadian Embassy and the United Nations (UNEP) in Mexico before coming to Finland, where my Finnish husband and I have a trilingual family. In Finland I am a lecturer at the University of Turku of Spanish translation, a Spanish teacher at the Swedish-language University Åbo Akademi, and have been involved in the University of Turku Post-Graduate course of Conference Interpreting (EMCI) since its first edition. At present I am enrolled in the Doctoral program in Translation and Intercultural Studies at the Universitat Rovira I Virgili in Tarragona, Spain, with Dr. Anthony Pym, writing my dissertation on ICT in interpreting.