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Türkiye'de uzaktan sözlü çevirinin alımlanması üzerine bir pilot çalışma / Ş. Kıncal; E. Ekici (979-990. s.)

61-Reception of remote interpreting in Turkey: A pilot study

Şeyda KINCAL[1]

Enes EKİCİ[2]

Abstract

This paper presents a pilot study which explores the perception of remote interpreting by conference interpreters who work in Turkey. It aims to describe the current status quo regarding the subject-matter. The paper gives a brief insight into the conditions that gave way to the invention of simultaneous interpreting, and then remote interpreting. An online survey was conducted to describe the current status of remote interpreting in Turkey. The findings from the survey show that even though interpreters might feel reliably confident in using communication and information technologies, i.e. computers and their peripherals, when it comes to remote interpreting, they do not have the same confidence. Another important finding is that they would not prefer remote interpreting over traditional on-site simultaneous interpreting, revealing a reluctance for remote interpreting among conference interpreters who participated in the survey, the most important issue for whom remains the quality of audio.

Keywords: Remote interpreting, conference interpreting, interpreting technologies

Türkiye'de uzaktan sözlü çevirinin alımlanması üzerine bir pilot çalışma

Öz

Bu makalede, Türkiye'de çalışan konferans tercümanlarının uzaktan sözlü çeviriye yaklaşımlarını araştıran bir pilot çalışmanın sonuçlarını sunulmaktadır. Konuyla ilgili mevcut durumu açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale, eşzamanlı çevirinin ve ardından uzaktan sözlü çevirinin icadına yol açan koşullara ilişkin kısa tarihi açıklamalar vermektedir. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye'de uzaktan çevirinin mevcut durumunu ortaya koymayı amaçlayan çevrimiçi bir anket yapılmıştır. Anketten elde edilen bulgulara göre tercümanlar kendilerine bilgisayar kullanma konusunda güvenseler de uzaktan sözlü çeviri söz konusu olduğunda, aynı güveni göstermemektedir. Diğer bir önemli bulgu da, uzaktan sözlü çevirinin konferans ortamında bulunarak yapılan eşzamanlı çeviriye tercih edilmemesidir. Bu durum da ankete katılan konferans tercümanlarının uzaktan sözlü çeviri konusunda isteksiz olduklarını göstermektedir. Katılımcılar için en önemli sorun ise ses kalitesi olarak kayda geçmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Uzaktan sözlü çeviri, konferans çevirmenliği, sözlü çeviri teknolojileri

[1] Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Mütercim Tercümanlık Bölümü (İzmir, Türkiye), eraslan.seyda@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4713-1537 [Araştırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 21.11.2020-kabul tarihi: 20.12.2020; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.843469]

[2] YL Öğrencisi, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Mütercim Tercümanlık ABD (İzmir, Türkiye), genage@genage.me, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2762-1355

1. Introduction

Conference interpreting has been an ever-changing profession since its inception in 1920s. The default mode of interpreting prior to simultaneous interpreting was consecutive interpreting. But in the 1920s, a need for faster interpreting emerged. The consecutive form of interpreting took as much time as the speech itself. In a globalizing world where meetings took place in multilingual settings, it was important to save time. One of the ways to do so was cutting the time it took to interpret by inventing a new mode of interpreting: simultaneous. In a way, it could be said that the world after World War I became more and more connected, and international institutions were created for keeping the world peace and preventing another world war.

This relationship between an ever-globalizing world and interpreting has been established by one of the scholars who has studied conference interpreters' interactions with information and communication technologies. In her description of a circular food-chain consisting of interpreting, intercultural communication and globalization, Diana Berber (2010) explains that intercultural communication feeds globalization and intercultural communication derives its momentum from interpreting. Any change in this food chain would then affect the other two. In this scenario, the more globalized the world becomes, the more interpreting is needed. In the post-war world after WWI, a push to make the world more connected led to the initial changes in the interpreting profession. Another reason for the push for an invention was the fact that French was no longer the only language used in international settings. As Francesca Gaiba (1998) notes in her book *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpreting: The Nuremberg Trials*, most international meetings and conferences prior to the 20th century took place in French. This was, however, challenged as diplomats from anglophone countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States who attended international meetings insisted that English be used alongside French. Although arguments for a bilingual conference were numerous, the prevailing one was the fact that the US Senate, which had the constitutional authority to ratify treaties, wanted to see the document in English (Baigorri-Jalòn, 2014). Historically speaking, the postbellum institutions such as the League of Nations and the International Labor Organization became the birth places for simultaneous interpreting in the West while the 6th Congress of the Communist International, also known as Comintern, in 1928 was the first place where simultaneous interpreting technology was tested in the Soviet Union (Chernov, 2016).

Sergei Chernov's paper on the development of simultaneous interpretation in the Soviet Union also shed light on how a need for faster translation was felt (2016). The Anglophone attendees at the 2nd Comintern in 1920, half of which was conducted in French, complained that despite the fact that there were more English speakers, English was not an official language at the event. A two-hour speech is reportedly interpreted only for twenty minutes to save time (Chernov, 2016, 139). There were also serious considerations to adopt Esperanto, an artificial language, as an auxiliary language for international meetings in face of interpreting challenges.

In view of these challenges, new solutions were proposed almost simultaneously both in Soviet Russia and in the West. V. Z. Epshtein, a Russian medical doctor, (Chernov, 2016) put forward the idea of using telephones that would enable simultaneous translation in 1925. One year later in 1926, the first simultaneous interpreting test, which was developed thanks to the efforts by Edward Filene, a businessman and philanthropist, took place at the International Labor Organization (Baigorri-Jalòn, 2014, 136). Although these tests showed some early understanding of the simultaneous mode,

simultaneous did not last just like the after-war peace that did not come along. That being noted, the perception of the technology by the interpreters was also negative (Baigorri-Jalón, 2014).

Simultaneous interpreting took its roots at the well-known Nuremberg Trials and became the standard in 1947 when the General Secretary of the newly established United Nations changed the default interpreting mode from consecutive to simultaneous (Baigorri-Jalón, 2016). The reason for the switch from consecutive to simultaneous was because the simultaneous mode saved time. The interpreters were, however, not very content with this change since they thought simultaneous interpreting caused a loss of quality. They also argued that the simultaneous interpreting made the interpreter's position less prominent since interpreters moved from the stage to back corners of the conference and meeting rooms where booths were located (*ibid.*).

Today, however, simultaneous interpreting can be considered as the default mode at international conferences and the need for remote interpreting is increasing day by day. This study aims to explore the conference interpreters' perception of remote interpreting in Turkey. This pilot study was conducted as part of an on-going MA thesis that will look into the matter at hand on a larger scale as reported elsewhere (Ekici & Kıncal, 2019).

2. Remote interpreting

For the purposes of this study, one should first make a clear distinction between various forms of interpreting known as remote interpreting. Sabine Braun (2015, 352) describes remote interpreting as " […] the use of communication technologies to gain access to an interpreter in another room, building, town, city or country." This definition would enable us to use any communication technologies for remote interpreting. For example, telephone is a very frequently used medium for remote interpreting and is actually the first type of remote interpreting going back to the early 1970s (Braun, 2015). 'Over-the-phone' interpreting or telephone interpreting is mostly used in situations where an interpreter is needed immediately and is not present *in situ*, e.g. police stations, hospitals. The study at hand takes the following definition put forward by Gigliobianco and Ziegler (2018, 122) who build on the ISO standard:

> " […] we broaden up the perspective and adhere to the definition given in the recently published iso 20108:2016, introducing the term of "distance interpreting" (with "remote interpreting" as admitted term), giving the definition of "interpreting of a speaker in a different location from that of the interpreter, enabled by information and communications technology (ICT)"."

The reason for choosing this definition over others is that it is up to date and relevant to the nature of remote interpreting that we experience today. The remote interpreting that one sees nowadays includes the basic reality of having the speaker and the interpreter in two different locations but is rather fluid. Both the interpreter and the speaker can be at their homes, or one of them might be at a studio or a hub. Another reason is that the International Association of Conference Interpreters, known as AIIC in its French abbreviation, adheres to this ISO definition in its glossary (AIIC, n.d.).

Although remote interpreting experiments go as back as to the late 1970s when the United Nations first tried remote interpreting with a satellite connection (Moser-Mercer, 2003), the first academic papers appeared in the mid-1990s (Mouzourakis, 1996). With the advent of a new millennium in 2000, the number of remote interpreting experiments increased (Moser-Mercer, 2003). The United Nations and the European Union did several experiments respectively in the late 1990s and early 2000s. One reason for this is financial concerns, especially on the part of the UN (Efimov et ali., 1987).

Adres | Address
İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi, Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi, Türkçe ve Sosyal Bilimler Eğitimi Bölümü, Türkçe Eğitimi ABD Cevizli Kampüsü, Kartal-İstanbul/TÜRKİYE
e-posta: editor@rumelide.com | İstanbul Medeniyet University, Faculty of Education Sciences, Turkish and Social Scinces Education, Turkish Language Teaching Education, Cevizli Campus, Kartal-İstanbul /TURKEY
e-mail: editor@rumelide.com

The European Union was, however, primarily concerned about space, as the number of official languages grew. It was not possible to have booths for every language in every conference or meeting room. So creating a hub from which remote interpreting was to be provided to conference rooms was one of the solutions. Here one can also clearly spot the pattern between interpreting and globalization as Berber (2010) describes in her food chain that includes interpreting, globalization and intercultural communication. As more countries became a member of the EU, the pace of globalization gained speed and it symmetrically occasioned more interpreting.

3. Remote interpreting in literature

This section includes parts of the literature on remote interpreting relevant to the present study. In an early article titled "Videoconferencing: Techniques and Challenges", Panayotis Mouzourakis (1996) writes that 'interpretation under videoconference conditions' will mostly be more tiring and cumbersome for interpreters resulting in a lack of motivation for the job. In a similar vein, in her paper, Barbara Moser-Mercer (2003) writes that interpreters feel less in control when working remotely and report more psychological stress as a result. In another article, Moser-Mercer (2005a) describes the importance of presence noting that being far away from the conference site not only causes psychological stress but also creates a whole new reality, i.e. a virtual reality, and importantly a lack of control. The author goes on to conclude that interpreters work well under normal working conditions but any changes in these conditions result in loss of quality and remote interpreting, regardless of sound quality and other factors, is different from on-site simultaneous interpreting as memory, production and listening efforts are all affected by it. She even wonders in another paper (2005b) whether a new generation of interpreters will be better prepared for this cognitive task. It should be noted, however, generational differences do not seem to play a part in early EU experiments (European Parliament Interpretation Directorate, 2001; 2002). Age differences might play a role in how interpreters from different age groups interact with remote interpreting, but no study has been conducted in this respect so far. A notable suggestion she makes is that interpreters take shorter turns rather than the usual 30 minute turns (Moser-Mercer, 2005a).

In her 2005 paper (2005a), Moser-Mercer acknowledged that there was a need for further research, especially controlled experiments. At the time of her research, remote interpreting was a phenomenon that was available only to institutional interpreters. That situation is much different thanks to the developments in information and communication technologies. Another reason why remote interpreting has become more mainstream is the current on-going COVID-19 pandemic. In an article published in 2006, Mouzourakis also recognizes how remote interpreting is an institutional phenomenon as he writes how remote interpreting was thought to solve existing problems and constraints in the multilingual institutional phenomenon. As mentioned above, remote interpreting has become more mainstream and is now not limited to institutions. A clear example would be "Covid-19 Distance Interpreting Recommendations for Institutions and DI Hubs" published by AIIC (2020).

In a 2010 article, Roziner and Schlesinger write that subjectivity and objectivity are rather on opposing sites as what interpreters report and what other collected data reveal contradict each other in comparing quality. They note that there is a faster decline in quality, showing the psychological cost of remote interpreting. In another paper by Ziegler and Gigliobianco (2018) where they discuss possible solutions for problems that occur in remote interpreting, they stress that a multidisciplinary approach is needed for further research. Their suggestion of "technological enhancements in the field of virtual reality and augmented reality, as well as immersive communication environments" taking part in

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interpreting scenes shows the lengths one has to go to achieve better quality and less psychological stress for interpreters in remote interpreting (Ziegler & Gigliobianco, 2018, 137).

One has to come to terms with the complexity that remote interpreting brings. Just as Ziegler and Gigliobianco discuss the similarity between the transition from consecutive to simultaneous and liken it to the current situation with remote interpreting, this is an on-going process and one has to take all parties into consideration, institutions, interpreters, employers, and users alike. Research has been mostly about the feasibility of remote interpreting technologies and their effects on interpreters and is likely to stay on this course until well-established trends are found.

In Turkey, with respect to remote interpreting, Özkaya (2017) discusses the recent medium shift in interpreting and examines the curricula in several interpreter training programs in Turkey in terms of their preparedness for remote interpreting. More recently, a survey has been conducted by The Conference Interpreters Association of Turkey, also known as TKTD (2020). Thus, obviously, remote interpreting deserves more research as a field of study more relevant than ever.

4. The present study

This paper, as part of an ongoing broader study that aims to explore the trends in the perception of remote interpreting among the conference interpreters who work in Turkey, presents a pilot study where preliminary data are collected and analyzed. The preliminary data consist of an online survey conducted in early months of 2020 well before the pandemic hit Turkey in mid-March of this year.

5. The survey

The survey titled "Remote Interpreting in Turkey: A Survey for Conference Interpreters" consists of three parts and was prepared in Turkish as presumably the A language of the target group. The first part seeks to collect general information about the respondent, namely, 1) gender, 2) university degree, 3) age, 4) years of experience as a conference interpreter, 5) language pairs the respondent works in, 6) whether the respondent has ever worked remotely, 7) and if yes, in what kind of a setting (healthcare, legal, etc.).
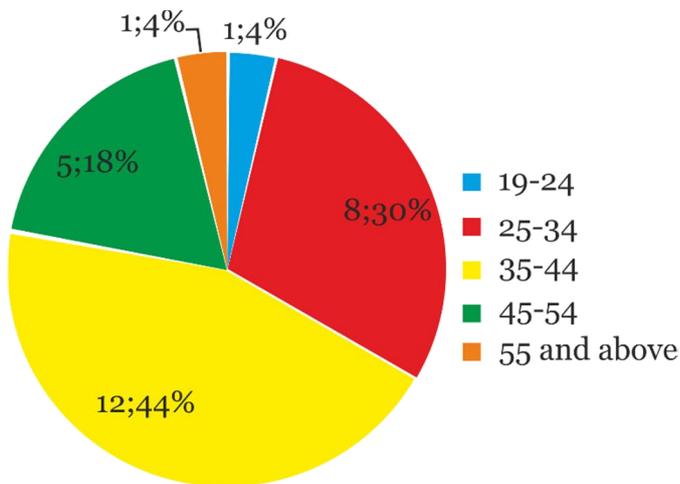
The second part called "General Attitude towards Technology" enquires into how often the respondent uses information and communication technologies as well as how capable they are of solving technical problems on their own. The third part is called "General Attitude towards Physical Conditions" and it involves questions on conference settings in general, such as the importance of vision of the stage, the speaker, and the audience for the interpreter, the importance of problems that might occur during a remote interpreting session etc. All questions except for the last question in this section have a numeric scale from 1 to 5 where 1 stands for "I do not agree at all" and 5 stands for "I absolutely agree". The last question in section 2 is a yes or no question that asks if the respondent can solve an internet connection problem on their own.

A total of 27 respondents took part in the survey. Some respondents were reached out to by means of direct mail as they were within the authors' network whereas others were reached through TKTD which kindly sent emails to its members. The responses were collected in four weeks in which the online survey remained accessible.
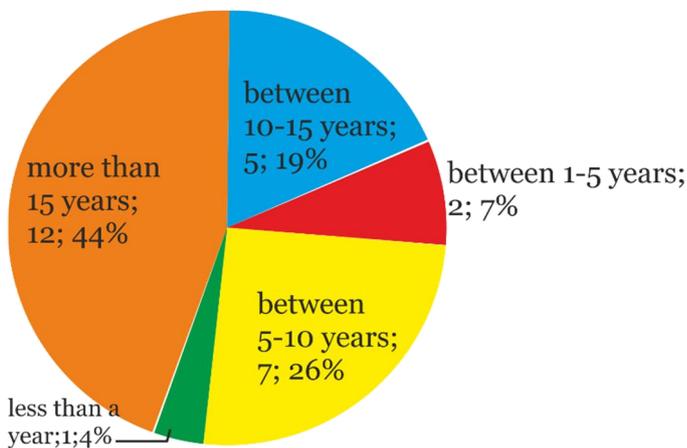
6. Results and discussion

6.1. Sections 1 and 2

Out of 27 respondents, only five are male, 22 respondents are female. In terms of educational background, 20 respondents hold a BA degree in Translation and Interpreting. Three of the remaining seven respondents have a BA degree in English Language and Literature. The rest have various BA degrees such as International Relations, Mathematics, and Drama. It should be noted that the survey does not inquire if the respondents have graduate degrees since this information would be thought as extra and unnecessary for the general context of the research.

As one can infer from this figure, a large proportion of the respondents are between the ages of 35 and 44. The second largest percentage belongs to the age group of between 25 and 34. These data show that generation X, people born in between 1965 and 1980, make up the majority of respondents, while millennials who are people born in between 1981 and 1996, represent the second largest group among the respondents.

Figure 1. Age group percentages of the respondents

With regard to years of experience, 44 percent of respondents declared more than 15 years of experience while 19 percent of respondents follow up with 10 to 15 years of experience. When one looks at the overall percentages in this figure, one sees that more than half of the respondents have at least 10 years of experience. 20 respondents also responded affirmative to the question whether they had interpreted remotely. The remaining had not used remote interpreting technology.

Figure 2. Years of experience

The last three questions in section 2 examines how comfortable a respondent feels around a computer. The first of these last questions establishes the general attitude of the respondent towards computers, the second one towards hardware and the third one towards software. Even though these might seem too general for a topic this specific, it must be highlighted that how a respondent approaches computers in general might be related to their perception of remote interpreting technologies.
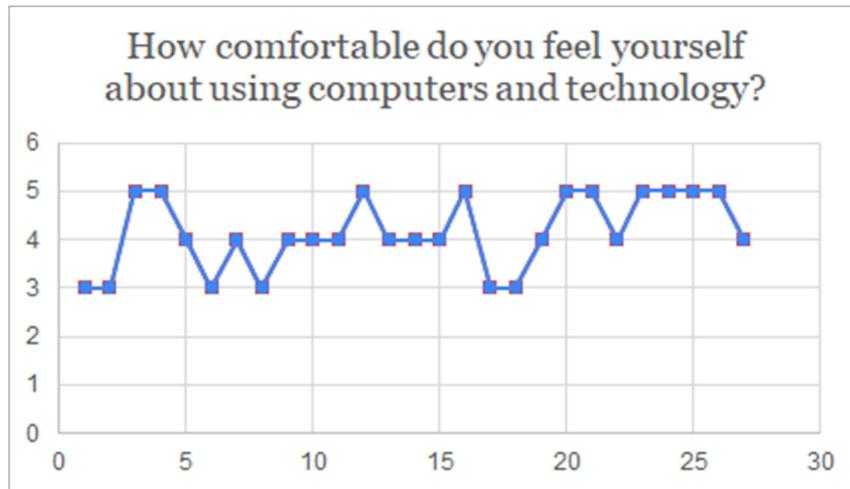
Figure 3. Attitude towards computers in general

This figure tells us that interpreters mostly feel comfortable with computers with no exception. Even though some reported 'undecided' on this issue, their number remains only at 6. The rest is either quite comfortable or extremely comfortable with computers. This figure indicates that the respondents should not feel reserved about remote interpreting.
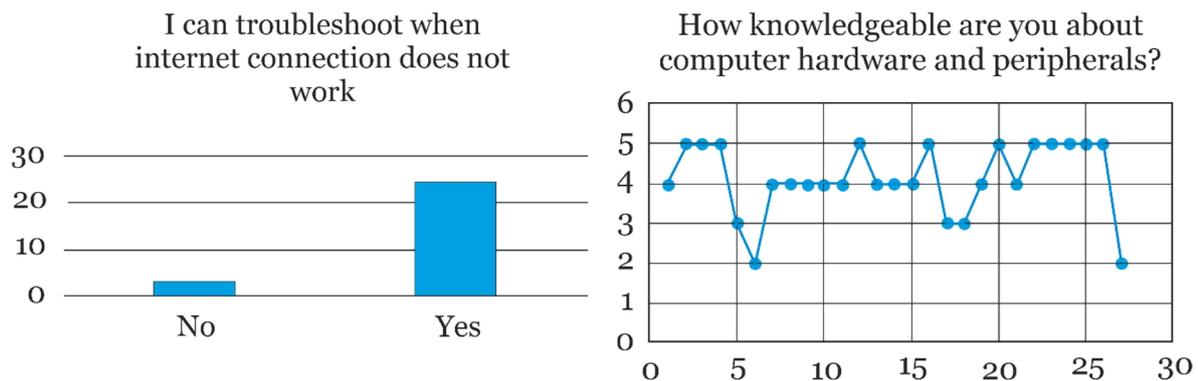

Figure 4 & 5. Attitudes towards basic software and hardware

Respondents overwhelmingly say that they can troubleshoot when an internet connection fails. While software related issues seem no big deal for the respondents, a larger group of respondents tell that they are not very knowledgeable in computer hardware and peripherals. Peripherals such as microphones and headsets are an important part of remote interpreting since a conference interpreter working from their home location is generally required to use their own headsets.

6.2. Section 3

This section features six questions about a conference setting, while three others are about remote interpreting. The last question is on problems likely to occur in remote interpreting.

As stated above, most respondents feel comfortable with computers. Yet, no one answered with "I strongly agree" to the statement "I can handle connection problems or other technical problems on my own in remote interpreting". 12 respondents stuck with "undecided" while only six agreed that they could solve such problems on their own. The remaining 9 respondents either strongly disagreed or just

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disagreed, five and four of them respectively. This is directly in contrast with their statement in section 2 where respondents overwhelmingly said that they can handle technical and internet connection problems on their own. Thus, remote interpreting seems to place an extra load on the interpreters in terms of solving connection or technical problems.
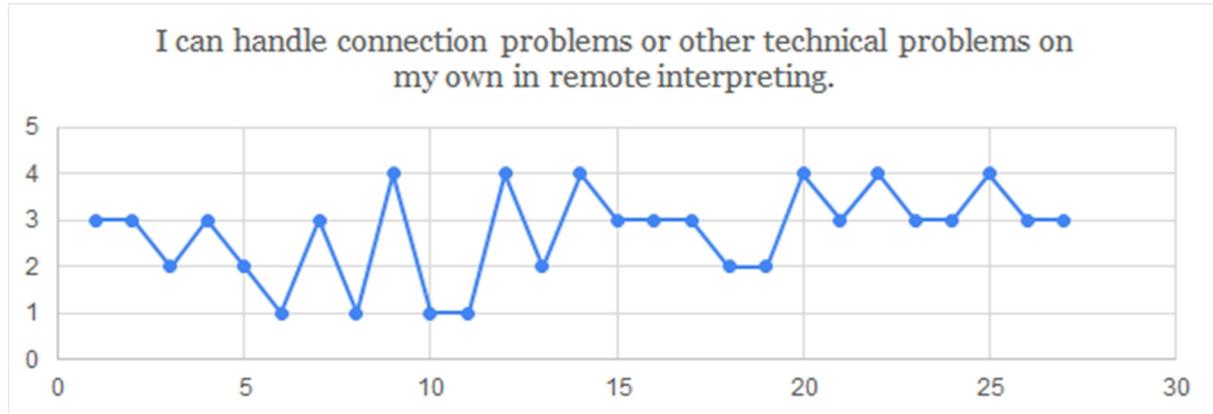

Figure 6. Respondents' answer to whether they can handle problems in remote interpreting

Almost all respondents want to see the speaker's presentation and the stage during interpreting and they think it might improve their performance.
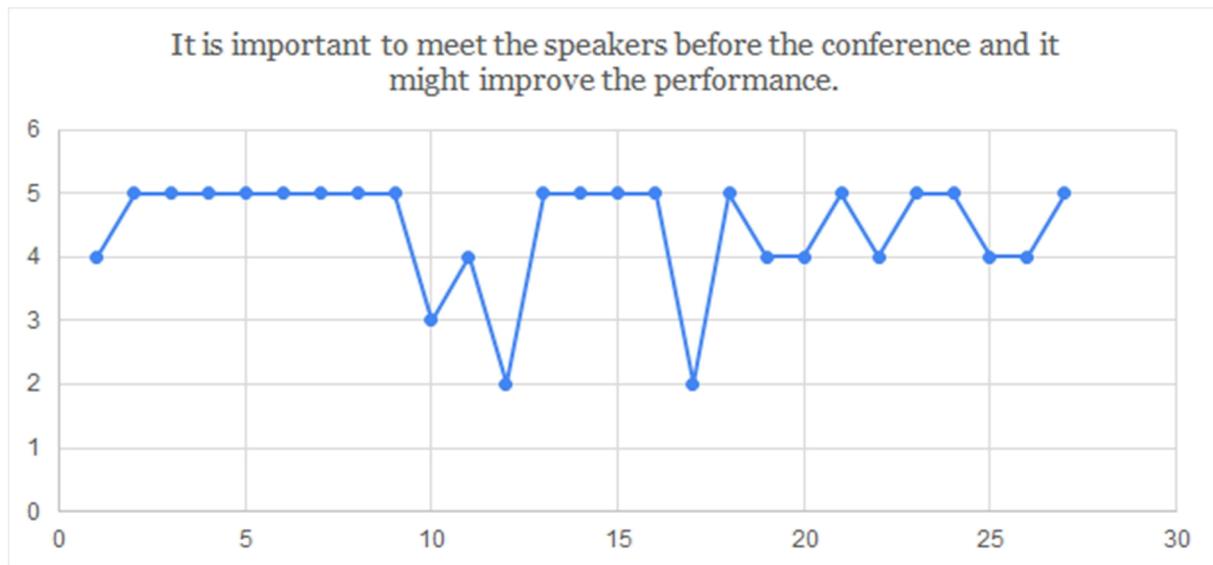

Figure 7. Respondents' answer to meeting speakers beforehand

Most of the respondents, namely 24, also want to meet the speakers but there are three exceptions, one of whom remained undecided on the issue, who do not think meeting the speakers beforehand is as important as seeing the stage and the presentation as can be seen on the figure above. In a similar fashion, all respondents except for seven of them think it is important to be present at the conference room as it is shown on the figure below.
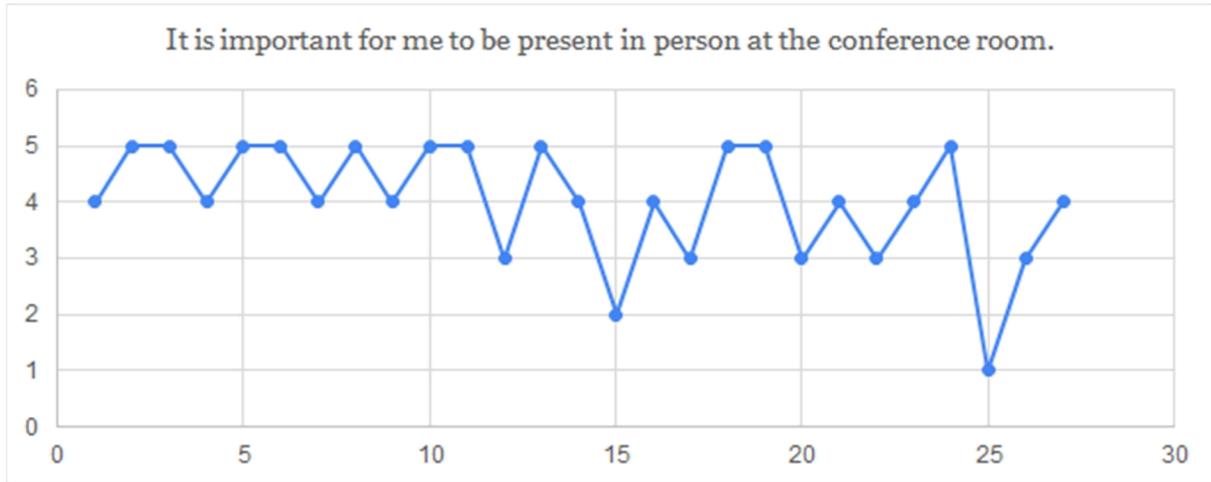
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Figure 8. Respondents' answer to being present at the conference room

Almost all respondents, meaning 25, "strongly" agreed to the statement "Working in physical conditions where an interpreter feels comfortable improves performance", while the other two respondents "agreed" to the statement. This question might seem irrelevant at first sight but it shows how important a work location is. When not at a hub or in a booth, interpreters work from home where a number of external factors such as outside nose, roaming pets and kids might distract them and affect their performance. No respondent remained undecided or disagreed to this statement.

Another matter is the case for travelling. Interpreters need to travel to other cities for conferences and some might have trouble finding time in their calendars for different assignments in other cities. 16 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement that "travelling creates no difficulties for me". While six remain undecided, five others disagree in some form. A majority of respondents, as can be inferred, do not find it difficult to travel meaning that remote interpreting would not be a preferable option for them mostly.
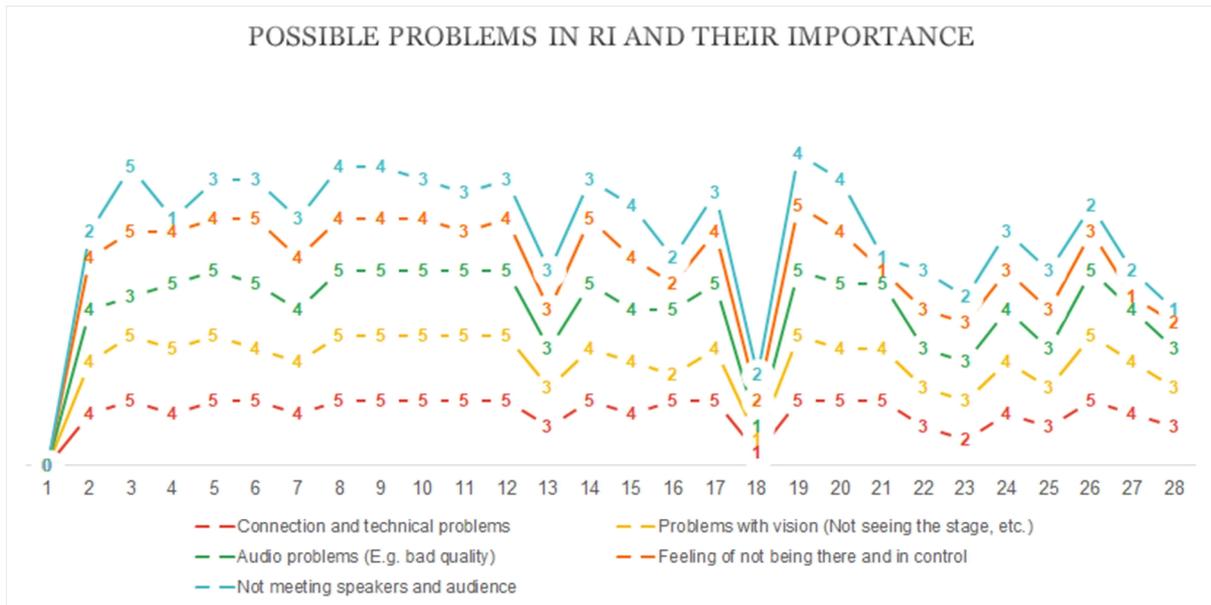

Figure 9. Possible problems in remote interpreting and their importance for respondents

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e-posta: editor@rumelide.com	**e-mail:** editor@rumelide.com

The scale for the figure above is as follows: 1) Not important at all, 2) slightly important, 3) important, 4) fairly important, 5) very important. The most important possible problems in remote interpreting according to the survey are connection and technical problems and audio problems, as 15 respondents voted "very important" for both of these problems. These are also in alignment with what respondents reported to questions about solving connection issues and other technical problems. While no one voted "not important at all" or "slightly important" for most problems, a majority of respondents, 12 to be precise, voted meeting speakers and audience beforehand as "important". If one is to find the most important issue by means of the problem having no 'not important at all' or 'slightly important' votes, audio problems are the most important since it only has one 'not important at all' vote.
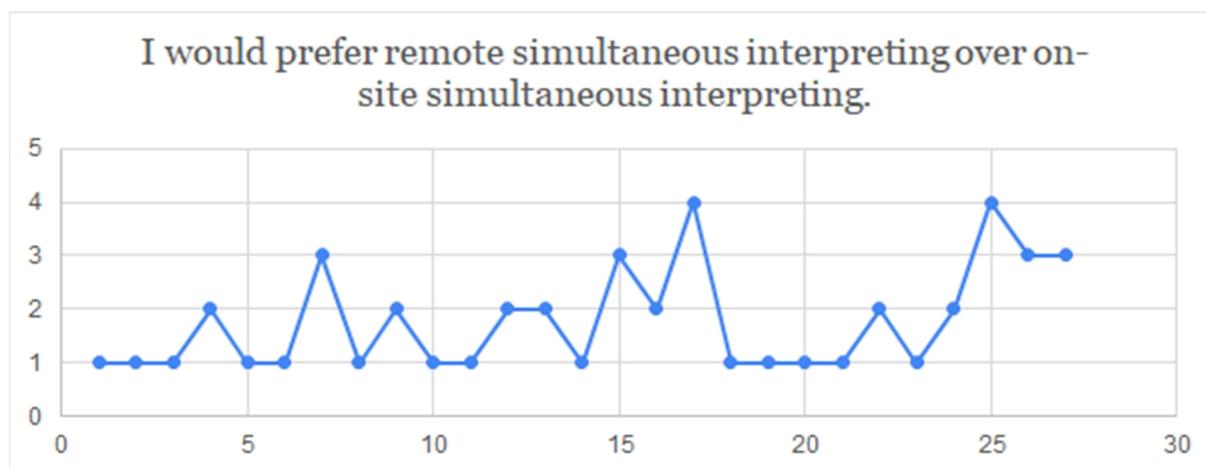

Figure 10. Respondents' answer to preferring RSI to SI

The most striking of all answers is the overwhelming disagreement to the statement "I would prefer remote simultaneous interpreting over on-site simultaneous interpreting." A total number of 21 respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed to this statement. While four interpreters reported 'undecided', only two agreed. This clearly shows that there is a reluctance, if not a resistance, for remote interpreting among conference interpreters who work in Turkey.

7. Conclusion

Based on the literature review of this study and in line with the extraordinary conditions that make remote work in any field a necessity rather than a preference, it can be acknowledged that remote interpreting is here to stay. Interestingly, the survey analyzed in the present study shows that interpreters are not very willing to use it. Conference interpreters prefer on-site interpreting to remote interpreting for personal reasons, such as their self-declared incompetence with respect to the technical aspects of RI despite their reported knowledge of ICT in general, as well as professional reasons, such as networking and meeting conference speakers and participants before the conference, contributing to the sense of being physically present and in control in on-site interpreting. Most importantly, even if they report confidence in their computer usage skills, they do not show the same confidence when they are asked if they can solve various problems that might come into existence during remote interpreting. All in all, almost none of the respondents of the survey prefer remote interpreting over traditional simultaneous interpreting, although problems might and do occur there too, which are possibly easier to handle given the years of experience and familiarity thanks to the strategies developed for this specific type of interpreting. One should bear in mind, as Özkaya (2017,

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117) describes the course of recent events in interpreting, that we have been going through a 'medium turn'. One might conjecture that while remote interpreting is not likely to be the default mode of interpretation in any way in the foreseeable future, it is very likely to become more mainstream, even in a post-pandemic world.

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