

Interpreting as a Service: The Uberization of Interpreting Services

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Abstract

This proposed paper examines the phenomenon which might be referred to as the Uberization of the interpreting and language services as well as the possible benefits and the potential drawbacks of applying the Uberization model to conference interpreting and language services. One needs to consider valid concerns such as income instability, loss of professional standards, and the potential commoditization of specialized skills. The article also discusses how the gig economy nature of Uberization might lead to reduced job security, lack of benefits, and challenges in maintaining quality and ethical standards within the scope of interpreting and language services in general. While the model offers convenience and accessibility, it raises critical questions about the sustainability and integrity of the interpreting profession in an increasingly on-demand digital landscape. This article attempts at looking at the phenomenon through the remote interpreting services platforms and their affiliated marketplaces with possible conclusions for the interpreters and the interpreting industry in an overall context of professionalization.

Keywords: Gig economy, uberization, conference interpreting, remote interpreting, professionalization

Hizmet olarak Sözlü Çeviri: Sözlü Çeviri Hizmetlerinin 'Überleşmesi'

Öz

Bu makale sözlü çevirinin ve genel anlamda dil hizmetlerinin Überleşmesi adı verilebilecek olguyu irdelemekte ve söz konusu Überleşme modelinin konferans çevirmenliği ve dil hizmetlerine uyarlanması olası faydaları ve potansiyel sakıncaları incelenmektedir. Gelir istikrarsızlığı, profesyonel standartların kaybı ve uzmanlaşmış becerilerin potansiyel olarak metalaştırılması gibi geçerli kaygıların dikkate alınması ve dikkatlice değerlendirilmesi gerekmektedir. Makalede ayrıca, Überleşmenin esnek ekonomik doğasının, genel olarak sözlü çeviri ve dil hizmetleri kapsamında iş güvenliğinin azalmasına, fayda eksikliğine ve kalite ve etik standartların sürdürülmesinde nasıl zorluklara yol açabileceğini tartışmaktadır. Söz konusu model kolaylık ve erişilebilirlik sunarken, giderek daha fazla talep gören dijital ortamda sözlü çeviri mesleğinin sürdürülebilirliği ve bütünlüğü hakkında kritik soruları da gündeme getirmektedir. Bu makale, adı geçen Überleşme olgusuna uzaktan çeviri hizmetleri platformları ve bunlara bağlı pazar yerleri aracılığıyla, genel bir profesyonelleşme bağlamında çevirmenler ve sözlü çeviri endüstrisi için olası sonuçlar açısından bakmaya çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Gig ekonomisi, überleşme, konferans çevirmenliği, uzaktan sözlü çeviri, meslekleşme

1. Professionalization of interpreting as a profession

Conference interpreting is a critical profession that plays a pivotal role in facilitating cross-cultural communication and fostering global cooperation. In essence, conference interpreting serves as a critical bridge between languages, cultures, and disciplines, promoting mutual understanding, cooperation, and progress on a global scale. It enables the voices of diverse individuals to be heard, enhances collaboration, and contributes to the advancement of knowledge and the resolution of global challenges.

The process of professionalizing conference interpreting has evolved over time, adapting to the changing demands of a globalized world. There has been a rather long journey of how conference interpreting has

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transformed from a relatively informal practice to a highly specialized and regulated profession on the global stage.

The roots of conference interpreting can be traced back to diplomatic and international conferences in the early 20th century. These events demanded effective communication among delegates speaking different languages, giving rise to the need for skilled interpreters. Initially, interpretation was informal and often carried out by multilingual diplomats or amateurs. As international events grew in complexity and significance, the demand for professional interpreters increased, prompting the need for formalization.

The first significant steps towards the professionalization of conference interpreting occurred after World War II with the establishment of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). These institutions recognized the importance of language services in facilitating dialogue among nations. The Nuremberg Trials also highlighted the necessity of accurate interpreting in legal proceedings, further emphasizing the significance of professional conference interpreters.

When we look at the interpreting profession, one notices it has undergone significant changes and development over the last 60 years. The major stages in the evolution of the interpreting profession could be summarized as follows:

In the aftermath of World War II, there was a growing need for interpreting services in international organizations, such as the United Nations (previously referred to as the League of Nations). Interpreting was largely viewed as a diplomatic function and was often performed by staff members or ad hoc interpreters who took lengthy notes and tried to reproduce the speeches of the delegates for extended periods of time.² During this time, the norm of the interpreting was consecutive interpreting due to a lack of technology and the existing norms governing the industry.

However, in the 1950s, simultaneous interpreting technology was developed which allowed for real-time interpretation in large international conferences. This initial version of the simultaneous interpreting was called the *hushaphone* which dates to 1920's, patented by IBM employee Alan Gordon Finlay, sporadically used before the Second World War- marked a significant advancement in the profession and paved the way for the development of professional interpreting as a standalone field. Following this advancement, the norm of the interpreting world shifted from consecutive to simultaneous interpreting.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the interpreting profession began to professionalize, with the establishment of professional associations and training programs. Standards and guidelines for interpreting were developed, and certification processes were put in place to ensure the quality of interpreting services. This is a very pivotal milestone as formal training and professional organization formation are among the prerequisites of a fully-fledged profession.

Coming to 1980s and 1990s, technological innovations and advancements continued to transform the interpreting profession. The use of computers and digital technology in interpreting became more widespread, and remote interpreting technologies, such as videoconferencing, were developed. Today, it has become an indispensable part of not only the interpreting arena but language and communication services in general.

Starting from the 2000s, different sub-domains started to be more visible within the overarching field of interpreting, namely community interpreting, legal interpreting, healthcare interpreting, media interpreting etc. With the "cultural turn" taking place in the Translation Studies domain, the Interpreting

² Valerie Taylor-Bouladon, *Conference Interpreting: Principles and Practice*, BookSurge Publishing, 3rd edition, 2007.

Studies, and the profession itself took their rightful share from this shift in terms of the approach. Interpreters and the interpreting practice became more visible and less 'mechanic'.

Overall, the interpreting profession has undergone significant changes and development over the last number of decades. From its early origins as a diplomatic function, interpreting has evolved into a standalone profession with established standards and guidelines. Technological advancements and globalization have continued to shape the profession, leading to new opportunities and challenges for interpreters. Interpreters have become indispensable stakeholders of the communication in almost every domain and today any discussion excluding the interpreters or language-service providers will be an incomplete one, particularly within the context of communication, marketing and diplomacy.

Several key factors which contributed to the establishment of conference interpreting as a professional field could be mentioned.

In the mid-20th century, formal training programs for interpreters began to emerge. Institutions like the *École de Traduction et d'Interprétation*³ in Geneva and the Monterey Institute of International Studies⁴ in the United States pioneered interpreter training. These programs emphasized language proficiency, specialized subject knowledge, and advanced interpreting techniques with their high-quality teaching faculty.

Professional associations such as the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC)⁵ were founded to promote ethical standards, ensure quality, and represent the interests of interpreters worldwide. The AIIC established a Code of Professional Ethics⁶, which became a cornerstone for guiding interpreters' conduct. There are also other professional organizations such as American Translators' Association, NAATI etc. safeguarding the profession as well as the standards and working rules of the interpreters. Turkish member organization of AIIC is Turkish Association of Conference Interpreters (TKTD)⁷ is the designated professional body working to improve the standards of the conference interpreters and the interpreting industry in general in Türkiye, established in 1969; working as the sole professional organization for conference interpreters in the country.

Needless to say, the advent of technology, particularly simultaneous interpretation equipment, transformed the way conferences were interpreted. This innovation increased the demand for skilled interpreters who could adapt to new tools and techniques effectively. The sharp surge in the demand for Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (RSI) is a great case in point. During the COVID-19 and the lockdowns brought by the pandemic almost became 'new normal' of the interpreting scene.

The late 20th century witnessed increased globalization and the proliferation of international conferences across various sectors, from diplomacy and trade to science and technology. This expansion brought new challenges, such as the need for interpreters to handle specialized terminology and maintain cultural sensitivity at the same time. The profession responded by diversifying into various domains, including legal, medical, business, financial and scientific etc. interpreting.

However, despite significant progress, several challenges do persist in the professionalization of conference interpreting:

The first aspect is the qualification disparities: The absence of standardized qualification requirements across countries can lead to varying levels of interpreter competence and inconsistency in interpreting

³ <https://www.unige.ch/fti/fr/>. Last Access 9 July 2023.

⁴ <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/>. Last Access 9 July 2023.

⁵ <https://aiic.org/>. Last Access 9 July 2023.

⁶ AIIC Professional Code of Ethics, https://aiic.org/document/10277/CODE_2022_E&F_final.pdf.

⁷ www.tkttd.org. Last Access 9 July 2023.

quality. Individual countries and their professional organizations and bodies attempt at establishing certification and professional competencies frameworks. Türkiye has been working on its own Translator & Interpreter Professional Competencies since 2012⁸ and the competency framework for Sign Language Interpreting has been published. Further work is expected to be finalized for Conference Interpreting, Community Interpreting as well as other domains of translation.

Rapid technological innovations and the changes brought forward pose another challenge in this regard. While technology has undoubtedly improved interpreting efficiency, it has also necessitated continuous training to keep up with evolving tools and platforms. RSI, mentioned hereabove, is a great example illustrating the continuous need to stay current afloat all the changes in the industry. The already existing mode of interpreting was elevated to a new dimension with the newly emerging RSI platforms and marketplaces through which not only the interpreting practice was taking place but also the transaction of finding and/or hiring interpreters was possible. The marketplace created by the RSI platforms did bring forward a certain level of novelty into the interpreting practice and changed or attempted to change the market conventions.

Last but not least; ensuring diversity has to be ensured. The profession needs to reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the global community, emphasizing the importance of training interpreters in lesser-known languages. This is particularly pivotal in the light of English as a default *lingua franca*.

It is fair to state that the professionalization of conference interpreting has evolved from ad-hoc practices to a highly specialized and regulated field that bridges linguistic and cultural gaps on the international stage. The journey of a much needed and prestigious professional has been shaped by historical events, advancements in technology, and the establishment of ethical standards through the collective work of national, regional and international professional organizations. As the world continues to connect and collaborate across borders, the ongoing professionalization of conference interpreting remains crucial to effective communication, cooperation, and mutual understanding among nations. However rapid changes in the way technology and business world operate have ongoing repercussions on the profession of interpreting and not all of them are that positive.

2. The phenomenon of 'Uberization'

The concept of the "Uberization" of industries, referring to the disruptive influence of technology-enabled platforms like Uber, has been reshaping traditional sectors across the globe. This phenomenon has now extended its reach to interpreting as well as translation, where digital platforms are transforming how language services are accessed, delivered, and perceived. The term "Uberization" of interpreting profession refers to the growing trend of using technology platforms to connect interpreters with clients. The term takes its name from the popular ride-hailing app, Uber, which uses a similar model to connect riders with drivers. Clients can request interpreting services through an app or website, and interpreters can accept the job on a first-come, first-served basis. The use of technology allows for hasty access to interpreting services, without the need for extensive planning, scheduling or matching the right interpreters for the right assignment and/or topic.

At this point one has to consider the implications and nuances of the Uberization of these language services, exploring both its potential benefits and the challenges it poses to the profession and practice of translation and interpreting.

⁸ Çevirmen Ulusal Meslek Standardı (Seviye 6), https://www.myk.gov.tr/images/articles/editor/2013/300113/CEVIRMEN_Seviye_6_UMS.pdf. Last Access 9 July 2023.

As Gökhan Fırat suggests in his award-winning work 'Uberization of Translation: Impacts on Working Conditions'⁹ "the introduction of digital labour platforms into translation production and business networks has not yet provided a significant contribution to the working conditions of translation workers in Turkey". Instead, he argues "their working conditions have been rearranged and reorganized in accordance with the uberization of (translation) work" (Fırat, p.48).

It is clear that the advent of digital platforms has revolutionized various industries, and interpreting is no exception. The Uberization of interpreting involves the creation of online platforms that connect clients in need of interpretation services with a pool of freelance interpreters. Similar to the ride-hailing model, these platforms allow clients to quickly find interpreters on-demand, often using apps or websites, offering convenience and speed. Such platforms include Kudo¹⁰, Ablio¹¹, Interprefy¹², Interactio¹³ etc.

At first these platforms were designed and established to offer the clients to set-up and conduct their virtual meetings coupled with interpreters and interpreting service. However later on, the marketplace has been added whereby clients could look up, find and hire interpreters for their meetings, sometimes even with a short notice. This might seem to be a great advantage and convenience for many however it is not the same case from the interpreters' point of view for a number of reasons. That is why the phenomenon of uberization of interpreting should be evaluated very carefully, weighing in both the advantages and the disadvantages for the parties of the communication.

It is fair to state that the uberization of interpreting expands access to language services for individuals and organizations alike. Clients can request interpreters at their convenience, reducing the time and effort traditionally required to find qualified professionals. However, it is yet another point of discussion whether they will get quality interpreting service given that the interpreter(s) will have practically no or very limited time for preparation in case of a last-minute assignment.

Digital platforms streamline the process of hiring interpreters by automating administrative tasks such as scheduling, payment, and coordination. This efficiency benefits both clients and interpreters. The timely payment is a significant gain for the interpreters as the due dates could be rather delayed in some countries and Türkiye is no exception in this regard.

Such RSI platforms can connect clients with interpreters from around the world, enabling them to access specialized expertise and rare language combinations that may not be readily available locally. This is also a great benefit, not only in terms of geographical coverage and outreach but also in times of despair, such the global COVID-19 which resulted in a global lockdown. The events which would otherwise have been cancelled did take place thanks to RSI platforms. Yet it was not without challenges on the side of the interpreters. For instance the interpreters had experienced difficulties with the poor sound, varying incoming sound levels of different speakers, the increased stress of being the sole person in charge in the absence of a physical boothmate and/or an expert technician, the so-called Zoom fatigue due to prolonged exposure to computer screen and light, the feeling of being alone etc. All these factors significantly contributed to the workload and stress levels of the interpreters. Turkish Association of Conference Interpreters conducted a Remote Interpreting survey and published a report of the findings in 2020.¹⁴

⁹ Gökhan Fırat, *Uberization of Translation: Impacts on Working Conditions*, The Journal of Internationalization and Localization, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Volume 8, Number 1, 2021. pp 48-75.

¹⁰ <https://kudoway.com/>

¹¹ <https://ablio.com/>

¹² <https://www.interprefy.com/>

¹³ <https://www.interactio.io/>

¹⁴ TKTD RSI Report, <https://www.tktd.org/uzaktan-sozlu-ceviri-anket-raporumuz-yayimlandi/>.

Some argue that the uberization model offers interpreters greater flexibility, allowing them to set their availability and choose assignments that align with their expertise and schedule. However, this has been also the case for the conventional set-up therefore this new mode of operation does not seem to be offering a valid benefit for the interpreters vis-a-vis flexibility.

As indicated before, the uberization trend in the interpreting industry comes with a number of downfalls. Quality is perhaps one of the major concerns in this regard. Maintaining consistent quality in interpreting is paramount, and the uberization model could potentially lead to variability in interpreter skills and qualifications as there might be different interpreters on different occasions and assignments due to the last-minute nature of such platforms. Furthermore, as the price plays an important role on these platforms, this might lead to a gradual decline in the fees for interpreters in a highly competitive environment. There is also the risk of situation leading to a crowded marketplace where freelancers compete for assignments. This can result in a race to the bottom, where workers may lower their rates to secure work, ultimately diminishing the value of their services. The gig economy-mentality can lead to the perception that language services are easily commoditized, with clients valuing low prices over the quality and expertise of the interpreter or translator. This can undermine the value of specialized skills and years of experience.

There is also the notion of interpreter-client relation which needs to be taken into consideration. The virtual nature of these platforms might lead to less personalized interactions between clients and interpreters, potentially affecting the overall user experience. However, this is even a bigger issue for the interpreters and their personal and professional well-being as mentioned hereabove. The feeling of being the sole person in charge while interpreting in the absence of a boothmate and/or an expert sound technician leaves the interpreter feeling that they need to address any potential challenge or troubleshoot on their own. Needless to say, this is a major contributing factor to an already high level of professional and cognitive burden incurred by the interpreter.

The topic of income is yet another topic which carefully needs to be address within the context of uberization phenomenon or the gig economy approach: this *modus operandi* might also translate into income instability for interpreters who rely solely on gig-based assignments.

As we see in the work of Firat:

...because their activities and income on digital labour platforms are neither continuous nor guaranteed, this situation may put translation workers in a more vulnerable situation, thus resulting in an escalation of precariousness which may contribute to greater labour market and income inequality, low overall earnings, long working hours, poor job stability, poor health (chronic stress, anxiety, depression, etc.), loss of independence, fewer resources to devote to personal development and a lower financial capacity of spending for training and education (Firat, *ibid.* p. 60).

As one can see, the uberization of translation and interpreting services might shift the focus of such specialized services to cost and availability axis hence an increased precariousness of the financial and psychological well-being of the translators and the interpreters. It should be reiterated that interpreting is a highly advanced, cognitively, physically, and mentally demanding task which requires a number of efforts functioning simultaneously.¹⁵ Such an intellectual task should not be treated as if it is a mere commodity, traded in the hands of intermediaries based on price and availability. Interpreting goes beyond mere language translation; it requires a deep understanding of cultural contexts and nuances. There is an inherent

¹⁵ For further information please see Daniel Gile and his Efforts Model of Interpreting. *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter Training: Revised Edition*. Benjamins Translation Library, 2009.

risk in the uberization phenomenon that digital platforms and such marketplaces might not always adequately address these aspects. It should be also noted that a one-size-fits-all approach might not suffice

There is also the equality aspect which is also important within the context of inclusivity. Unfortunately, not all interpreters have equal access to technology, or the digital skills required to navigate these platforms, potentially exacerbating disparities in the profession. This also might mean that very experienced and skilled older generation of expert interpreters might stay away from such platforms or will not be preferred for interpreting assignments due to perhaps reduced visibility or exposure. This, in turn, might mean a loss not only for the communication parties who might otherwise be making use of such qualified interpreters and their rendering.

3. Navigating the path forward

To address the challenges brought forward by the globalization and the inevitable technological advancements, stakeholders in the interpreting profession must take a proactive approach and consider each dimension of this equation very meticulously. As technology continues to shape how services are accessed and delivered, interpreters, clients, and other stakeholders must work together to navigate this evolution thoughtfully. By leveraging the advantages of digital platforms while upholding the integrity and professionalism of the field, the interpreting profession can ensure that language services remain accurate, accessible, and invaluable in an increasingly interconnected world.

First of all we need to acknowledge the fact that interpreting is a highly intellectual, cognitively and mentally demanding and intense task with repercussions on both the physical and psychological well-being of the interpreters. While Uberization might work well for immediate services like transportation, interpreting almost always requires thorough preparation. Interpreters need time to familiarize themselves with the subject matter, glossary, and participants to ensure effective communication. As stated before, a one-size-fits-all approach would not prove very useful at this point.

Ethical and professional conduct is another very pivotal topic to be considered especially within the context of the new digital world. The confidentiality and cybersecurity issues have to be addressed on such platforms as well so that the clients could continue to work at peace with such platforms. The topics interpreted and discussed could be very strategical and tactical that is why this issue should not be undermined by the RSI platforms.

While it is true that in essence, RSI platforms and such marketplaces allow flexibility, there is also the inherent risk that this can lead to a lack of clear boundaries between work and personal life. This can result in burnout and stress as interpreters struggle to manage their time effectively. Considering the already demanding work undertaken by the interpreters; this might eventually result in further stress on the side of the interpreters. The topic of fair labor prices, policies that protect the rights of the interpreters have to become integral aspects of this overall shift in the industry as well. There is also an impending risk that the use of technology platforms to connect interpreters with clients may lead to a race-to-the-bottom on pricing, with interpreters competing for jobs based on their willingness to work for lower rates. This should certainly not be the case

No matter how much the dynamics of the so-called gig economy are characterized by speed and availability; the notion and profession of interpreting have to be tackled in a larger context with all the other dimensions taken into consideration. The human aspect, the quality of the interpreting, the relationship among the different stakeholders of the communication process should be maintained otherwise the commodization or the uberization of the interpreting profession becomes inevitable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the complexity and nuances inherent in interpreting profession make it a challenging fit for the uberization model. While technology can certainly enhance the profession by aiding in scheduling, communication, and coordination; it is crucial to maintain the professionalism, ethics, and specialized skills that are fundamental to accurate and effective interpreting services. It is also pivotal to maintain the human touch as the interpreting process from end-to-end is a highly communicative process. This aspect of interpreting should not be changed just to turn the profession and the industry into a merely transactional sector.

A profession is comprised of many aspects as well as economic parameters. Symbolic value is one of the integral aspects of what makes a profession and is among the important constituents of a profession. According to Bourdieu (1991), status is one of the factors contributing to the economic capital and prestige falls underneath the symbolic capital. Therefore the profession of interpreting should not be reduced to merely the economic parameters nor should we fall into the 'convenience trap' to maintain the prestige and status of the profession of interpreting. The world as know is changing however this change could function much better with the already established standards and codes of ethics.

While the concept of uberization has revolutionized several industries, its application to conference interpreting raises concerns that cannot be ignored. As mentioned in the article; the negative implications of uberization on the field of interpreting are multifaceted and warrant careful consideration. The erosion of quality control, the potential for devaluation of specialized skills, and the risk of compromising ethical standards underscore the complexities of adapting interpreting to an on-demand model. Furthermore, the very essence of interpretation, which encompasses cultural sensitivity, contextual understanding, and dynamic real-time communication, poses a challenge for a standardized platform-driven approach.

By embracing uberization in interpreting, there is a risk of transforming a nuanced profession into a transactional service, where expertise and the intricacies of language and culture are overshadowed by quick, commodified solutions. The personalized interaction and rapport-building between interpreters and participants, crucial for effective communication, could be diluted, affecting the overall experience and outcomes of interpreted events.

Moreover, the gig economy model inherent in uberization might lead to instability for interpreters, lack of benefits, and an overall erosion of the value of their services. The interpreting profession's potential transformation into a fragmented landscape could impact job security and long-term career prospects, challenging the sustainability of dedicated language professionals.

Ultimately, the uberization of conference interpreting highlights the importance of safeguarding the professionalism, expertise, and ethical considerations that underpin the field. While technological advancements are valuable tools, they must be harnessed thoughtfully to preserve the integrity of interpreting as a dynamic and indispensable bridge between languages and cultures, ensuring that its richness and significance are not overshadowed by a one-size-fits-all approach. According to Herbert, interpreting is deemed as "one of the fairest and loftiest occupations in the world" (1952, p. 3), the onus is on us to keep it as such in the upcoming future of the interpreting profession and domain.

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