**What is Simultaneous Interpretation?**

Simultaneous interpretation is the transformation of speech, from one language into another, in real-time. This is generally done by a professional human interpreter, who is an expert in the source and target languages. This professional is usually certified.

Simultaneous interpretation is a crucial tool in today’s globalized world. In this article, we will look at the present of this profession (its characteristics and challenges) and its future (focusing on remote interpretation and the use of artificial intelligence).

**Simultaneous Interpretation vs. Translation**

Simultaneous interpretation is often confused with translation, but they have important differences. In the case of simultaneous interpretation, an interpreter transforms speech from a source language and into a target language. The interpreter does this as precisely as possible. Sometimes, however, the interpreter is not able to transform all of the speech. In these cases, an interpreter must keep on interpreting, rendering intent as closely as possible, though using a certain artistic license.

Translation, on the other hand, is most closely associated with the translation of written texts. A translator will, therefore, work on written material such as books, articles, academic texts, etc. In translation, extreme precision is usually expected, and a necessity.

**Differences between Types of Interpretation**

**Simultaneous Interpretation**

Simultaneous interpretation is usually done with the aid of electronic equipment. Thus, a typical setup would involve an interpreter sitting in a booth and rendering an interpretation to the audience using such specialized equipment.

**Consecutive Interpretation**

Consecutive interpretation is different to simultaneous interpretation. In consecutive interpretation, an interpreter waits for a pause in the speech to provide an interpretation. Usually, an interpreter will stand or sit next to the speaker, and not in a booth.

**‘Whispering’**

A lesser-known form of interpretation is ‘whispering’, also called ‘chuchotage’ in the original French. Essentially, what this means is that the interpreter sits next to one or two people and interprets what is being said by the speaker. Such a form of interpreting is reserved for business meetings and situations of that sort.

**Simultaneous Interpretation and its Importance**

Several types of multinational meetings and conferences often require simultaneous interpretation. It is one of the most common forms of interpretation although it is quite difficult. In simultaneous interpretation, the interpreter has to translate what was said within the time allowed by the speaker’s pace without changing the natural flow of the speech.

In simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter has to interpret what the speaker says at the same time as the speaker is giving the speech. There should be no waiting time between the interpretation and the receipt of what is being said. A short pause is allowed to process the words of the speaker. Simultaneous interpreting is often used at the United Nations. Presidential speeches also use simultaneous interpreting.

It was during the Nuremberg Trial that was held after World War II ended that The first time that simultaneous interpreting was used.

**What is interpretation?**

Language interpretation involves the verbal translation of a speech being delivered. The interpreter converts the speech in the source language into the required target language, just like a written translation. Six [types of interpretation](https://www.daytranslations.com/interpreting-services/interpreting-types/) are widely used around the world: simultaneous, consecutive, whispered, travel/escort interpreting, over-the-phone interpreting (scheduled) and on-demand phone interpreting.

It is the job of the interpreter to successfully deliver all the semantic elements in the speech including its tone. The interpreter also has to deliver the intent of the message the speaker wants to convey.

**Very demanding work**

In the world of language services, simultaneous interpretation can be classified as the most demanding. The interpreter must have excellent language skills and more than average fluency in two languages. Further, he or she must be mentally prepared, especially if the meeting or conference is a long one and involves many speakers. Being a simultaneous interpreter means correctly interpreting what is being said while injecting the nuances necessary in the target language. The environment itself can already be stressful. The interpreter cannot consult a dictionary to look up unfamiliar expressions and terms, which is reason enough to have excellent proficiency in the source and target languages. The interpreter must be fully confident of their speaking skills. The job demands that the interpreter must also be skilled in improvisation.

**Simultaneous interpreting**

**1. Translation vs. interpreting**

In English, the words ‘translation’ and ‘translating’ are often used as an umbrella term to

cover both written translation and interpreting, while the words ‘interpretation’ and

‘interpreting’ are generally used to refer to the spoken and/or signed translation modalities only.

Two further points need to be made here: the first is that translation also includes a

hybrid, ‘sight translation’, which is the translation of a written text into a spoken or signed speech. Simultaneous interpreting with text, discussed later in this article, combines interpreting and sight translation. The second point is that while in the literature, there is generally a strong separation between the world of spoken (and written) languages and the world of signed languages, in this paper, both will be considered. Both deserve attention and share much common ground when looking at the simultaneous interpreting mode.

**2. Interpreting modes and modalities**

In the world of interpreting, the consensus is that there are two basic interpreting modes:

simultaneous interpreting, in which the interpreter produces his/her speech while the

interpreted speaker is speaking/signing – though with a lag of up to a few seconds – and consecutive interpreting, in which the speaker produces an utterance, pauses so that the interpret can translate it, and then produces the next utterance, and so on.

In everyday interaction between hearing people who speak different languages and

need an interpreter, consecutive interpreting is the natural mode: the speaker makes an

utterance, the interpreter translates it into the other language, then there is either a response or a further utterance by the first speaker, after which the interpreter comes in again, and so on.

In interaction between a hearing person and a deaf person, or between two deaf persons who do not use the same sign language (American Sign Language, British Sign Language, French Sign Language etc.), simultaneous interpreting is more likely to be used.

**3. The history of simultaneous interpreting: a few pointers**

The literature about the history of interpreting tends to associate simultaneous interpreting with the development of conference interpreting, and in particular with the Nuremberg trials, after World War II (e.g. Ramler, 1988; Baigorri Jalón, 2004). It is definitely the Nuremberg trials which gave high visibility to simultaneous interpreting, which had been experimented with at the ILO (International Labor Organization) and at the League of Nations with limited success (Baigorri Jalón, 2004, chapter III), perhaps to a large extent because of resistance by leading conference interpreters who were afraid that this development would reduce their prestige and be detrimental to working conditions (Baigorri Jalón, 2004, p. 148).

In signed language interpreting, in all likelihood, simultaneous interpreting became a

popular interpreting mode, perhaps even a default mode early on. It allowed faster

communication than consecutive. Moreover, whereas in spoken language interpreting, there is vocal interference between the source speech and the interpreter’s speech, in signed language interpreting, there is none. Ball (2013, p. 4-5) reports that as early as 1818, Laurent Clerc, a deaf French teacher, addressed US President James Monroe and the Senate and Congress of the United States in sign language, and “while he signed”, Henry Hudson, an American teacher, “spoke the words”.

After World War II, simultaneous was used mostly in international organizations

where fast interpreting between several languages became necessary and where waiting for several consecutive interpretations into more than one language was not an option. But it soon extended to other environments such as multinational corporations, in particular for Board of Director meetings, shareholders meetings, briefings, to press conferences, to international medical, scientific and technological conferences and seminars, and to the media. Television interpreting, for instance, has probably become the most visible form of (mostly) simultaneous interpreting, both for spoken languages and for signed languages, and there are probably few people with access to radio and TV worldwide who have not encountered simultaneous interpreting on numerous occasions.

Professional conference interpreter organizations such as AIIC (the International

Association of Conference Interpreters, the most prestigious organization, which was set up in Paris in 1953 and has shaped much of the professional practices and norms of conference interpreting) claim high level simultaneous interpreting as a major conference interpreting asset, but simultaneous interpreting is also used in the courtroom and in various public service settings, albeit most often in its whispered form.

All in all, it is probably safe to say that besides signed language interpreting settings,

where it is ever-present, simultaneous interpreting has become the dominant interpreting mode in international organizations and in multi-language meetings of political, economic, scientific, technical and even high-level legal meetings as well as in television programs, while consecutive interpreting is strong in dialogue interpreting, e.g. in one-on-one negotiations, in visits of personalities to foreign countries, and in encounters in field conditions where setting up interpreting equipment is difficult.

**4. An analysis of the simultaneous interpreting process**

**4.1 How is simultaneous interpreting done?**

Is simultaneous interpreting possible at all? One of the early objections to simultaneous

interpreting between two spoken languages was the idea that listening to a speech in one language while simultaneously producing a speech in another language was impossible.

Intuitively, there were two obstacles. Firstly, simultaneous interpreting required paying

attention to two speeches at the same time (the speaker’s source speech and the interpreter’s target speech), whereas people were thought to be able to focus only on one at a time because of the complexity of speech comprehension and speech production. The second, not unrelated to the first, was the idea that the interpreter’s voice would prevent him/her from hearing the voice of the speaker – later, Welford (1968) claimed that interpreters learned to ignore the sound of their own voice (see Moser, 1976, p. 20). Interestingly, while the debate was going on among spoken language conference interpreters, there are no traces in the literature of anyone raising the case of signed language interpreting, which presumably was done in the

simultaneous mode as a matter of routine and showed that attention could be shared between speech comprehension and speech production.

As the evidence in the field showed that simultaneous interpreting was possible between two spoken languages, from the 1950s on, investigators began to speculate on how this seemingly unnatural performance was made possible, how interpreters distributed their attention most effectively between the various components of the simultaneous interpreting process (see Barik, 1973, quoted in Gerver, 1976, 168).

One idea was that interpreters use the speaker’s pauses, which occur naturally in any speech, to cram much of their own (‘target’) speech – see Goldman-Eisler, 1968, Barik, 1973.

However, in a study of recordings of 10 English speakers from conferences, Gerver found that 4% of the pauses only lasted more than 2 seconds and 17% lasted more than 1 second. Since usual articulation rates in such speeches range from close to 100 words per minute to about 120 words per minute, during such pauses, it would be difficult for interpreters to utter more than a few words at most, which led him to the conclusion that their use to produce the target speech could only be very limited (Gerver, 1976, 182-183). He also found that even when on average of 75 percent of the time, interpreters listened to the source speech and produced the target speech simultaneously, they interpreted correctly more than 85 percent of the source

speech.

There are no longer doubts about the genuine simultaneousness of speaking and

listening during simultaneous interpreting – though most of the time, at micro-level, the

information provided in the target speech lags behind the speaker’s source speech by a short span. Anticipation also occurs – sometimes, interpreters actually finish their target language utterance before the speaker has finished his/hers. According to Chernov (2004), such anticipation, which he refers to as “probabilistic prognosis”, is what makes it possible to interpret in spite of the cognitive pressure involved in the exercise.

Basically, the simultaneous interpreter analyzes the source speech as it unfolds and

starts producing his/her own speech when s/he has heard enough to start an idiomatic

utterance in the target language. This can happen after a few words have been produced by the speaker who is being translated, or a phrase, or more rarely a longer speech segment.

For instance, if, in a conference, after a statement by the Chinese representative, the

British speaker says “I agree with the distinguished representative of China”, interpreters can generally anticipate and even start producing their target language version of the statement as soon as they have heard “I agree with the distinguished” with little risk of going wrong. In other cases, the beginning of the sentence is ambiguous, or they have to wait longer until they can start producing their translation because the subject, the objet and the verb are normally positioned at different places in the target language.

One of the earliest and most popular theories in the field, Interpretive Theory, which

was developed at ESIT, France, by Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer in the late 1960s and early 1970s (e.g. Israël & Lederer, 2005), presents the interpreting process in both consecutive and simultaneous as a three-phase sequence. The interpreter listens to the source speech ‘naturally’, as in everyday life, understands its ‘message’, which is then ‘deverbalized’, i.e. stripped of the memory of its actual wording in the source speech. This idea was probably inspired by psychologists, and in particular Sachs (1967), who found that memory for the form of text decayed rapidly after its meaning was understood. The interpreter than reformulates the message in the target language from it's a-lingual mental representation (see Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1989). Central to this theory is the idea that interpreting differs from ‘transcoding’, i.e. translating by seeking linguistic equivalents in the target language (for instance lexical and syntactic equivalents) to lexical units and constituents of the source speech as it unfolds. While the theory that total deverbalization occurs during interpreting has been criticized, the idea that interpreting is based more on meaning than on linguistic form transcoding is widely accepted. As explained later, it is particularly important in simultaneous where the risk of language interference is high.

**4.2 Cognitive challenges in simultaneous interpreting**

Lay people often ask how simultaneous interpreters manage to translate highly technical speeches at scientific and technical conferences. Actually, the language of specialized conferences is not particularly complex in terms of syntax, much less so than the language of non-technical flowery speeches, and its main difficulty for interpreters is its specialized lexicon. The relevant terminology needs to be studied before every assignment, which can be done with the appropriate documents, and interpreters tend to prepare ad hoc glossaries for specialized meetings.

Language is not the only challenge that simultaneous interpreters face. There are also

cultural challenges, social challenges, affective challenges having to do with their role as message mediators between groups with different cultures and sometimes different interests, as witnesses of events and actions about which they may feel strongly, as persons whose social and cultural status and identity can be perceived differently by the principals in the interpreter-mediated communication and by themselves, but these challenges are not specific to simultaneous interpreting and will not be discussed here.

The main cognitive challenge of simultaneous interpreting is precisely the high

pressure on the interpreter’s mental resources which stems from the fact that they must

understand a speech and produce another at the same time at a rate imposed by the speaker. A more detailed analysis of the nature of this challenge is presented in Section 4.3. At this point, suffice it to say that interpreters have always been aware of the fact that the difficulty was considerable as soon as the speech was delivered rapidly, and that interpreters could not always cope (see for example George Mathieu’s statement made in 1930 as quoted in Keiser, 2004, p. 585; Herbert, 1952; Moser, 1976; Quicheron, 1981).

The practical consequence of this challenge is the presence of errors, omissions and

infelicities (e.g. clumsy wording or syntax) in the simultaneous interpreters’ production. How many there are in any interpreted speech or statement is a topic that interpreters are reluctant to discuss. It depends on a number of factors, including the interpreter’s skills and experience, features of the speech (see the discussion of problem triggers in the next section) and environmental conditions such as the quality of the sound (or image) which reach the interpreter, background noise, the availability of information for thematic and terminological preparation, and probably language-pair specific features. In many cases, interpreters are able to translate a speaker’s statement faithfully and in idiomatic, sometimes elegant language, but in other cases, which are far from rare, errors, omissions and infelicities (EOIs) can be numerous. In a study of authentic online simultaneous interpretations of President Obama’s inaugural speech in January 2009 by 10 professional interpreters working into French, German or Japanese, Gile (2011) found 5 to 73 blatant errors and omissions over the first 5 minutes of the speech. In other words, these experienced, proficient interpreters made on average from 1 to more than 14 blatant meaning errors or omissions every minute when translating a difficult, but not extraordinarily difficult speech.

How this affects the comprehension of the speaker’s message and intentions by users

remains to be investigated. Some EOs may have little or no impact, for instance if they affect speech segments which are highly redundant or of little relevance to the message, while others may deprive the users of important information – for example if numbers measuring the financial performance of a company are omitted or translated incorrectly. The number of EOIs is therefore not a sufficiently reliable metric to measure the amount of information actually transmitted to users of the target language, but the image of the simultaneous interpreter producing a very faithful and idiomatic version of the source speech in the target language at all times is clearly not a realistic one.