



# Handbook of Remote Interpreting

Edited by

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*SHIFT in Orality Erasmus+ Project*

*Shaping the Interpreters of the Future and of Today*

ERASMUS + KA2 STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Project n. 2015-1-IT02-KA203-014786

Project Coordinator: Prof. Félix San Vicente

DOI: 10.6092/unibo/amsacta/5955

ISBN: 9788898010851

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## 2.2. Traditional face-to-face vs telephone-mediated communication – with an interpreter

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In this section, we will see in further detail (see § 1.1) how interpreter-mediated communication over the phone differs from traditional face-to-face interpreted-mediated communication, and how interpreters can learn to cope with and manage such peculiarities.

The main difference between interpreter-mediated telephone communication and face-to-face dialogue interpreting is, of course, the lack of visual input and the use of one channel (audio) only. As research work carried out in the SHIFT in Orality partnership<sup>11</sup> as well as in previous studies<sup>12</sup> has observed, this can generate numerous added difficulties which may be due both to the lack of any input other than the auditory one and to possible acoustic problems, owing to bad lines or noise. This can lead to a series of possible problems that are specific to telephone interpreting and which may affect comprehension, turn management and the interpreting process in general (see § 2.3).

More specifically, we will have a look at the different configurations of telephone interpreting and at where and how participants can be located during a call (§ 2.2.1); we will discuss sound quality and how to improve it or cope with poor quality (§ 2.2.2); we will talk about how to make the best use of the equipment (§ 2.2.3) and, lastly, we will give some useful advice on how to manage communication over the phone (§ 2.2.4).

### *2.2.1. Constellations in telephone interpreting: participant distribution*

The possible constellations of remote (both telephone and video-mediated) interpreting have been presented in § 1.1.3. To sum up briefly, there are three main constellations in the location of participants in an interaction interpreted over the phone.

Although those basic constellations sum up all the situations occurring in telephone interpreting, some further remarks can be made on the location of participants in telephone interpreting in various communicative contexts.

While in traditional face-to-face dialogue interpreting all participants in the conversation (primary participants and the interpreter) share the same space, in telephone interpreting they do not; and interpreters may only be in the same place as some of the participants but not all of them.

In the first place, as explained in § 1.1.3, interpreter-mediated telephone conversations can be divided into two main groups: 3-point interactions, in which all participants in the conversation are in different locations (i.e. constellation 1, § 1.1.3), or 2-point interactions, in which either the interpreter is located with one of the primary participants or the two primary participants are co-located while the interpreter is located remotely (i.e. constellation 2, § 1.1.3).

Figure 1 shows one possible constellation, a 3-point telephone interaction in which all participants are located remotely, and connected on the same line.

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<sup>11</sup> For further details, see SHIFT in Orality Report 2: *Remote Technologized Interpreting (Telephone-Based And Video-Based Remote Interpreting): Main Features And Shifts With On-Site Bilateral Interpreting*.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Wadensjö (1999).

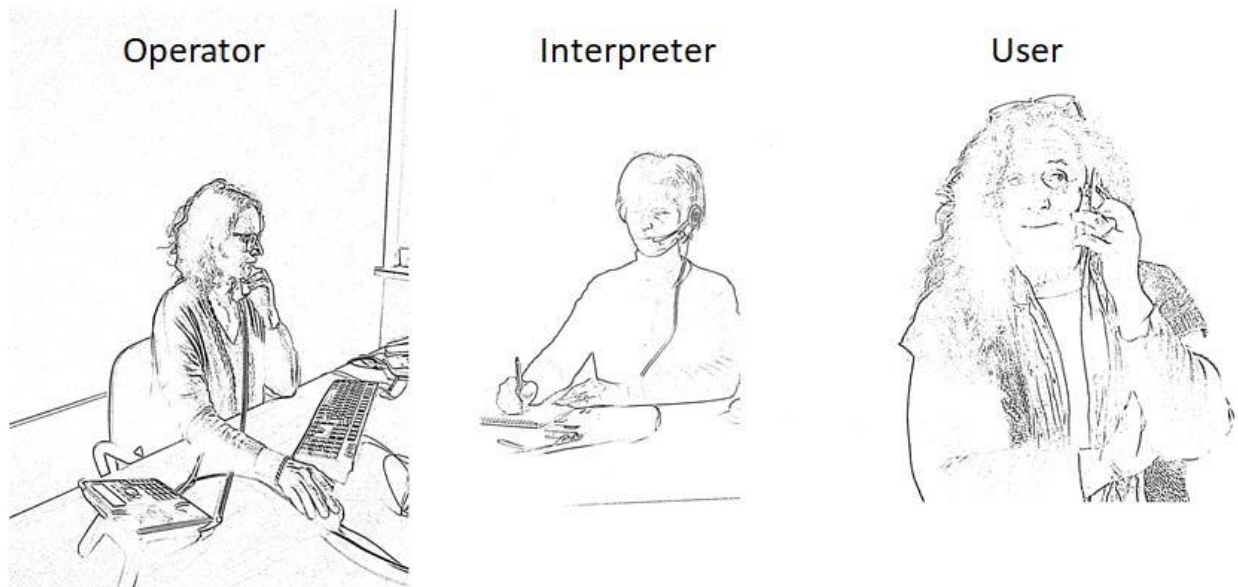


Figure 1. All participants are located remotely

Figure 2 shows the second possible constellation, in which two participants (in this case, the operator and the user) are co-located, while the interpreter is located remotely.

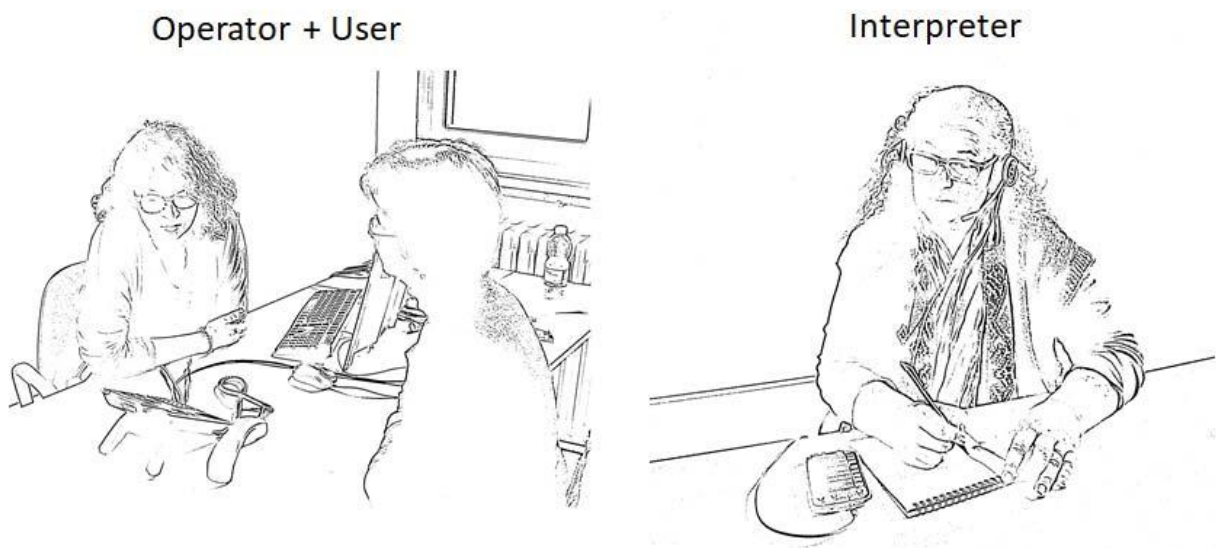
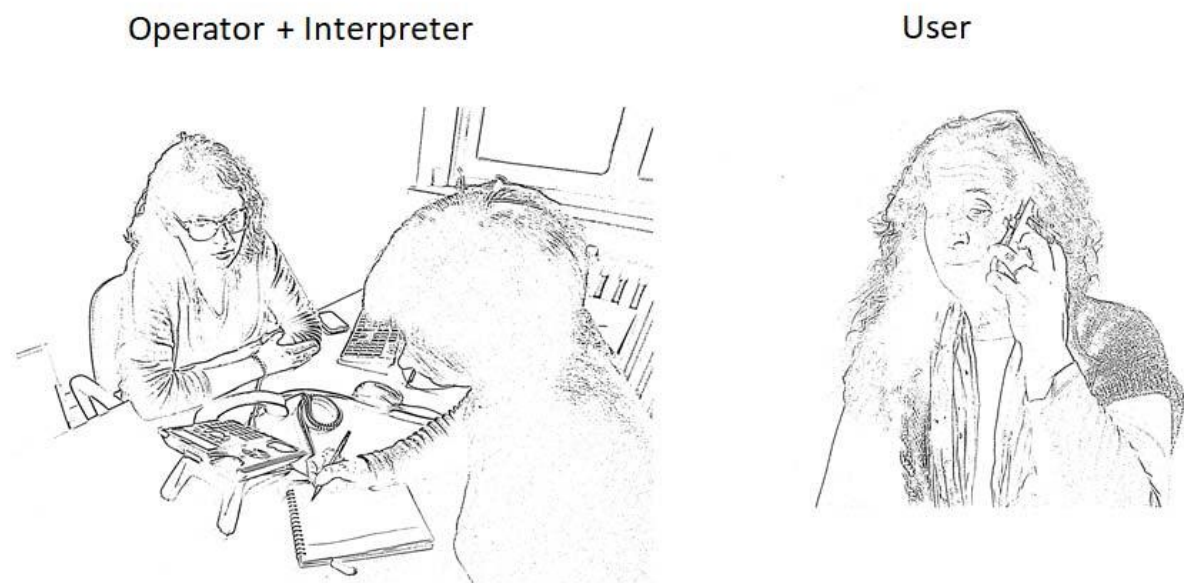


Figure 2. Operator and user are located together, while the interpreter is located remotely

Figure 3, lastly, shows a third constellation, where one of the primary participants is located with the interpreter, while the other participant is located remotely.





*Figure 3. Operator and interpreter are located together, while the user is located remotely*

However, there can be many variations to these two main schemes.

Let us start, for example, with the case of telephone interpreting being used by an **office** (such as a police office, a tourist information office, etc.). In the case of a two-point call, there will be either the operator and the user on one end of the call and the interpreter on the other, or the interpreter with one of the two primary participants (more likely with the police officer/operator or the tourist office employee/operator) on one end and the other primary participant on the other. Since the setting is an office, it is quite likely that the two co-located parties will be either sitting at the same table or standing at a desk. In the case of a 3-point call, the interpreter may be at home, or in the street; the policeman/operator in the office; and the caller anywhere: near a road accident, on the beach, at a railway station.

The situation might in some cases be different when telephone interpreting is used in healthcare services, as participant location can present **other configurations**. For example, 3-point calls can be used in this setting for follow-up calls to patients (or emergency calls, as we will explain below), while 2-point calls can be used in a variety of situations, mainly with the healthcare operator (doctor, nurse, etc.) and the patient co-located in the hospital or clinic, while the interpreter is located elsewhere. In the case of healthcare services, participant location and position can vary considerably depending on the specific case. The following are some possible examples (although this is by no means an exhaustive list), such as a doctor at the patient's bed, or examining a patient who may be standing, lying down, sitting or even moving, depending on the type of medical exam.

Finally, telephone interpreting can be used in **call centres** in many different settings (healthcare, public and private services, emergency, etc.). In this case, all interactions will be 3-point calls. While the operator's position will be more or less always the same (sitting at a desk, with a headset, probably in front of a computer), the user's position and location is totally unpredictable: sitting at a desk, walking in the street, in public transport, lying in bed or, in an emergency situation, at the roadside, inside a car, etc.

For the sake of simplification, the examples above all describe situations with two primary participants (doctor+patient, operator+user). However, as mentioned in § 1.1 there may be more than two primary

participants in the interaction: for instance, a doctor and a nurse interacting with a patient, or a police officer with a user and a user's relative or friend.

It is of primary importance that telephone interpreters be aware of all the possible configurations, in order to be prepared to cope with (and prevent, if possible) any communication problems that may arise due to participant distribution, position and condition. More importantly, it might be useful for interpreters to get a clear idea of the distribution for a specific interaction at the very beginning of it: due to the complete lack of visual input, a good interpreting strategy would be to create a mental image of the scene, in order to be able to manage it more effectively. Knowing where other participants are and what they are doing can help the interpreter understand when to take initiatives in the conversation in order to help participants achieve the goal of the interaction and avoid confusion. For example, an interpreter may produce utterances such as "Madam, could you show the doctor where the pain is by pointing with your finger?" or "Could you please show the operator your documents?" where the interpreter specifies that the patient should show the doctor where it hurts and the user should give the papers to the operator, rather than providing a general request to show where it hurts or give their personal details. Specifying the agency and authorship of utterances may be necessary on the phone to avoid confusion (see § 2.3.5).

### 2.2.2. *Sound quality*

The first remark that should be made about sound quality is that a telephone interpreter should know that sound quality over the phone will never be comparable to sound quality in the interpreting booth – nor, of course, to that of traditional face-to-face dialogue interpreting.

Furthermore, sound quality over the phone can be influenced by many non-strictly technical variables, such as the participants' location and consequent background noises, their position, their health status, etc.

Let us look at a few paradigmatic examples and some good practices to cope with them.

Let us start with the example of telephone interpreting being used in an **office**: if the office is a shared one, there might be background noises such as voices, phones ringing, printers, doors opening and closing and, if the call comes from a **call centre**, the interpreter will probably also clearly hear the operator typing on the keyboard. At the other end, the user might be in the street with traffic noise in the background, or on the bus, or in a crowded and noisy place. In this case, interpreters can start by asking participants to find, if possible, a quiet spot. If they cannot, interpreters can ask them to speak louder and as close to the microphone as possible.

Things might get more complicated in the case of **healthcare** and **emergency** services, in which one of the users may be lying down, in an uncomfortable position, and in poor health conditions, and therefore with a feeble voice. Furthermore, in an emergency (health, police, fire...), they may be scared, worried (see § 2.3.2), or feeling very bad, and this is very likely to influence their voice quality. In this case, a strategy can be that of simplifying the conversation by asking as many yes/no questions as possible, so as to reduce the user's turn-at-talk to the essential and get the information through.

### 2.2.3. *Equipment and system design (telephone management)*

The quality and set-up management of the equipment is extremely important for a successful telephone interpreting session.

On the primary participant's side, little control is possible over the equipment, but the interpreter can, if necessary (especially in the case of sound issues, described in § 2.2.2), ask participants to speak louder or closer to the telephone. In the case of a 3-point call, each participant will be using their own device while, in the case of a 2-point one, the two co-located participants might either be using the

same phone and exchange it in turns, or use a speakerphone or share a headset<sup>13</sup>. Ideally, all participants in the conversation should be able to hear everything, just as they do in traditional face-to-face interpreter-mediated interactions; therefore, using a speakerphone or sharing a headset are a first-choice option, whenever possible. In the case of a very noisy environment, headsets should be preferred to speakerphones.

While, as explained above, interpreters have little control over the users' equipment, there are many choices they can make in relation to **their own set-up**, in order to work as comfortably as possible.

If they work from a **call centre**, they are likely to have all the necessary equipment at hand (headset, computer, notebook).

When working from home or from her/his own office, the first thing a telephone interpreter should do is to find a **quiet spot** to work in. Ideally, an office or study where s/he can sit comfortably at a table, with paper and pens at hand and, even better, a computer for last-minute checks on online resources (glossaries, dictionaries, search engines). Obviously, s/he also needs to make sure that there is a good and fast connection in the chosen spot.

Secondly, given the importance of being able to take notes during remote interpreting (§1.1.9), it is advisable to have both hands free when interpreting; the use of a headset is therefore strongly recommended.

Finally, attention should be paid to reducing the interpreter's own **background noise** to a minimum, by trying to type and move pages "delicately" and as far as possible from the microphone. In order to reduce background noises both in the input and in the output, it might be useful to use noise-cancelling headsets. These headsets, originally designed to be used especially in call-centres, reduce both background noises in the sound input (that is, the background noises coming from the primary participants) and in the output (that is, the interpreter's background noises coming through the microphone).

#### 2.2.4. *Communication management*

In this final paragraph, we will present a few useful indications for managing communication in telephone interpreting before starting the conversation or at the very beginning, during the conversation and at the end of it.

#### **BEFORE STARTING OR AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CONVERSATION:**

The first step for a successful management of the interaction is to have a clear idea of the **configuration** (see §2.2.1) of the call; if this is not made clear by primary participants during a short briefing (§ 2.3.1) or at the beginning of the conversation, the interpreter should start whenever possible by asking specifically where participants are located and how they are positioned.

The following step would then be to try and visualise the situation in one's mind; **visualisation** is very useful in preventing possible problems in the communication, especially when this involves the use of objects or artefacts or the management of comprehension problems (see §2.3.6).

#### **DURING THE CONVERSATION:**

A fundamental strategy for conversation management, in the absence of visual clues, is that of marking **conversational turns** by explicitly attracting the attention of the primary participants. Due to the remoteness of the conversation and to the participants being located in different environments, not sharing the same space and not seeing each other, they are likely to get distracted when they are

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<sup>13</sup> Dualia SL has even designed and patented a "Biauricular", a headset designed specifically for telephone interpreting. It is longer than a standard one and has a microphone on each side, so that the two users who share it can sit (or lie down) comfortably and speak into their own microphone.

not directly involved in a conversational turn (i.e., when their turn is being delivered to the other participant or when the other participant is talking to the interpreter). Since the interpreter cannot look at one participant or the other to signal conversational turns, it might be useful to “address” the participants before starting a delivery in their direction (e.g.: “Sir”, “Madam”, “Doctor”, “Mr. Sawyer”, “Ms. Lee”, etc).

Another useful strategy for conversation management during the interaction is the **description of actions**; the interpreter should always bear in mind that participants either cannot see each other at all or only some of them can; therefore, it is useful to ask them to describe any action that they are performing or are about to perform (e.g. “I am going to look into the patient’s ear”, or “the user has just written down their personal details”, etc.).

In the case of problems with sound quality (see § 2.3.3), a useful strategy is that of keeping the interaction as simple as possible, by asking participants to privilege yes/no questions and short conversational turns whenever possible, or asking them to speak louder and more slowly.

### **AT THE END OF THE CONVERSATION**

When the conversation is about to end, the interpreter should make sure that the communication channel is being **closed with both sides**, and that primary participants have no more questions, doubts or things to say (see § 2.3.9).

Once the call is over (or regularly, e.g. once a month, or once a week), it would be very important to have a **debriefing** with the client and/or the service provider (telephone interpreting company) to discuss any technical issues or any other communication issues that might require clarification, or the adoption/update of a protocol for the interpreters.

#### **Points for discussion**

- What are the possible configurations of telephone interpreting?
- What are the specific difficulties of each different configuration?
- How can interpreters cope with possible issues with sound quality?
- How should the interpreters set up their own equipment?
- What should a telephone interpreter bear in mind before, during and after an interaction?

### **Recommended readings**

González Rodríguez, María Jesús; Spinolo, Nicoletta (2017): “Telephonic dialogue interpreting: a short teaching course”, L. Cirillo; N. S. A. Niemants (eds.), *Teaching Dialogue Interpreting. Research-based proposals for higher education*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

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