Videoconference interpreting

The evolution of videoconference technologies has led to two new modalities of interpreting. On the one hand, videoconferences are used to link remotely located interpreters to the primary participants. This is generally referred to as REMOTE INTERPRETING (RI). On the other hand, interpreters are used in videoconferences between parties who do not share the same language. This is termed videoconference interpreting (VCI) and comprises different configurations: the interpreter can be either co-located with one of the parties, or work from a separate site. The latter configuration leads to a multi-point videoconference between three (or more) sites. Similar configurations occur in TELEPHONE INTERPRETING. VCI has similarities with RI, and both modalities overlap to a certain extent, for example in three-way videoconferences. However, they have different motivations and are not interchangeable. Historically, the demand for both RI and VCI came from the language service needs of supranational organisations; today VCI is mostly required in legal settings.

VCI in supranational institutions

The earliest documented experiment with videoconferencing and interpreting took place in UNESCO in 1976. It linked the UNESCO headquarters in Paris with a conference centre in Nairobi via satellite and included tests of both RI and VCI. In the VCI tests, the interpreters were situated in Paris and interpreted for delegates at both sites. Similar experiments were organised by the United Nations in the 1970s and 1980s (see Mouzourakis 1996). At the UNISPACE conference in Vienna in 1982, communication from the Soviet cosmonauts on board the MIR space station was transmitted to the Vienna delegates by video link and interpreted for them by interpreters in the Vienna conference room. Although reports about these early tests do not always make a clear distinction between RI and VCI, they suggest that RI was perceived to be challenging or unacceptable, whilst VCI seemed less problematic. This overall trend was not reflected in VCI tests using ISDN-based videoconferences, e.g. in the European Commission in 1995 (see Mouzourakis 2006), where sound quality was found to be insufficient for simultaneous interpreting. However, the view that VCI is acceptable under defined circumstances, whilst RI is not, is also reflected in the AIIC guidance on the use of technologies in interpreting (AIIC 2000/2012). Subsequent research into
videoconference-based interpreting in supranational institutions has focused on RI, mainly to identify the exact sources of the problems associated with it.

**VCI in legal settings**

Legal institutions have turned to videoconferencing to make legal proceedings more efficient, minimise security concerns arising from prisoner transport, and support cross-border judicial co-operation. This has led to a growing demand for VCI in legal proceedings, normally conducted in consecutive mode. In many English-speaking countries, ISDN-based videoconference facilities were installed in the 1990s to link courts to other courts (e.g. to hear remote witnesses) and prisons (e.g. for bail hearings). A worldwide spread of videoconference technology in legal proceedings began in the 2000s, following the availability of broadband technology. In some countries, notably the Netherlands, the same equipment and layout were used in all courtrooms to facilitate the work of all involved, including the interpreter. Such approaches are likely to have contributed to relatively positive attitudes towards VCI among interpreters in these countries, whilst scepticism prevails in countries such as the UK, where videoconference equipment often still dates from the ISDN era (Braun & Taylor 2012a). Fowler (2007) notes problems with the interpreter’s positioning and access to the microphone, and with the quality of the video image, in English magistrates’ courts. She argues that these problems, together with the absence of specific protocols on VCI in court, lead to frequent disruptions, requests for repetition and misunderstanding.

One question arising, regardless of such issues, concerns the location of the interpreter in VCI. This was also one of the questions addressed by a comprehensive survey of VCI in Canadian immigration proceedings (Ellis 2004). In the setting examined, the immigration judge, the refugee protection officer and the interpreter sat in the immigration office, whilst the refugee and his/her lawyer were in another city. The fact that the interpreter was not co-located with the refugee was thought to have weakened the personal rapport between the two. It also caused interactional difficulties and precluded whispered interpreting. Judges felt that consecutive interpreting was disruptive. The hearings by video link also tended to be longer and were considered to be more fatiguing than comparable face-to-face hearings.

These findings were corroborated by the European AVIDICUS projects, which have focused on the viability of VCI and RI in legal proceedings. In addition, experimental studies conducted in AVIDICUS 1 (2008–11) showed that VCI (and RI) affected the quality of interpreting and caused more interaction problems than on-site interpreting. Overlapping speech proved difficult to resolve and led to information loss (Braun & Taylor 2012b). Furthermore, qualitative analyses of the communicative dynamics in
interpreter-mediated videoconference-based investigative interviews, court hearings and cross-border settlement cases, carried out in AVIDICUS 2 (2011–13), suggest that VCI entails not only a reduction in the quality of the relations between the participants but also a greater fragmentation of the discourse (Braun & Taylor 2014). AVIDICUS 3 (2014–16) assesses the implementation of videoconferencing facilities in legal institutions across Europe in terms of their fitness for VCI.

Other settings

The use of VCI in other settings is not very well documented, but some reports and interpreting service provider websites suggest that VCI is used across different segments of the interpreting market and that solutions in the commercial sector tend to be custom-made. They may also combine the use of the telephone and of videoconferencing to integrate interpreters into proceedings.

One configuration that is likely to gain momentum is three-way videoconferencing, whereby the primary participants and the interpreter are each in a different location. In the late 1990s, the ViKiS project in Germany assessed this configuration (Braun 2004). Using a prototype system, problems as well as adaptation strategies developed by the participating interpreters in this (then) novel working condition were identified. As in other studies, participants found the communication fatiguing and had difficulty establishing a rapport with the other participants. The sound quality in the ISDN-based prototype was insufficient. The one aspect to which interpreters were able to adapt was the interaction. The strategies evolved from reactive to more proactive strategies. However, the interpreters felt that they had to moderate the interaction, which posed ethical problems and increased the coordination effort (Braun 2004, 2007).

With regard to cognitive processing, Moser-Mercer (2005) outlines problems with multi-sensory integration in videoconferences, which she believes make it more difficult for interpreters to process information and build MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS of the situation.

References


