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## **Technology and Conference Interpreting: an introduction to the use of instant messaging apps**

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**Abstract.** This article presents the use of well-known instant messaging apps in conventional conference interpreting situations, as a tool to enhance real-time communication between a team of interpreters, thereby improving coordination before, during and after an assignment, and enabling the interpreters to present a highly professional image to event organizers and delegates.

**Keywords.** Conference interpreting; technology; instant messenger apps; professional expertise

### **1. Introduction**

Much of the literature on Technology and Interpreting to date has understandably focussed on the advent of Remote, Telephone Interpreting and Machine Interpreting, on the one hand, and Computer Assisted Interpreting Tools (CAITs), on the other. Understandably, because of the impact that the first two modalities of interpreting have had and continue to have on existing practices and markets, and some would say quality standards, working conditions, remuneration and prestige, and because of the advantages that well-designed CAITs can offer interpreters during several stages of their work. By contrast, this article aims to present the benefits of using an instant messaging app (an online chat that offers real-time text transmission via the Internet), before, during and after an event requiring Conference Interpreting, as an example of how existing technologies can play a role in enhancing the coordination within a team of interpreters working at the same event. This enhanced coordination enables members of the team to maximize coordination in real time, as well as to troubleshoot issues as, or even before, they arise. This practice is widely used in the private market in the Canary Islands, and we have other examples of similar practices in other private markets; whether or not this means of communication is commonly-used in institutional settings remains to be seen. Our aim, then, is to share an on-going practice, in the spirit of Setton's affirmation that "In interpreting, practice always came first, informing training and theory" (2007: 54).

### **2. Interpreting and technology**

Much has been written about a wide range of aspects regarding remote interpreting and telephone interpreting over the last twenty years, as the use of these modalities has spread, giving rise to concerns about quality, working conditions, remuneration and other issues. Generally speaking, interpreters have not embraced these innovations with gusto, although significant technical improvements make some of the current remote platforms a far cry from

the original experiences.

In terms of conference interpreting, Ziegler and Gigliobianco consider that “in the last few years, general conditions for conference interpreting have been changing constantly not only due to globalization and altered market needs, but also due to digitalization and extremely fast developing information and communication technologies” (2018). As Esteban Causo states:

New information and communication tools can create additional and richer communication opportunities. However, they require open-mindedness and an ability to change one’s approach to communication. The right tool should be carefully selected to match the corresponding communication objective” (2011: 200).

Even within “conventional” conference interpreting settings, Fantinuoli says there is “some evidence that the profession is heading towards a technological turn” (2018: 6), in the light of the advances in Computer Assisted Interpreting Tools and Machine Interpretation. New software and devices are coming on stream at a pace that can create new forms of demand as well as meeting existing market needs. Examples include tools to help interpreters elaborate glossaries by integrating different terminology resources, facilitating searches for terms or entities and identifying and extracting useful information from preparatory documents, and are based on a wide range of features. Their overall purpose is to lessen the burden of some of the most time-consuming tasks for an interpreter both during preparation (“such as the creation and organization of terminology”) and while on assignment, should last minute searches for terminology be required (Fantinuoli, 2018: 4).

Attention has also been paid to ICT, in the form of tablets, in Consecutive Interpreting (Goldsmith, 2015, 2018). The title of Lourdes de Rioja’s 2018 post on the subject (“Tablet Interpreting is Serious Fun”) may well be aimed at overcoming practitioners’ reluctance to take the plunge and opt for a digital support for what has long been the realm of pen(cil) and paper.

Given the generally negative attitude of interpreters to the advent of interpreting technologies (Corpas Pastor & Fern 2016), often fuelled by the natural feeling of insecurity and fear of technologically induced changes, Fantinuoli, 2018: 8, advocates a “balanced and responsible adoption” thereof, to ensure that the profession plays an active role in the transformation that they will inevitably bring about, and that practitioners are able to reap the advantages and opportunities entailed. He also calls for more research to anticipate future trends, to ensure the sector is prepared for “the disruptive changes caused by digital technologies”, and underscores the need for such research to “consider the interests of other stakeholders and encompass considerations of different nature, such as socio-economic parameters”.

Against this backdrop of the anticipated spread of new technology in conference interpreting, as it aligns more closely with interpreters’ needs, or as they become increasingly familiar and comfortable with working with the options it has to offer, we now turn to instant messenger applications, which are very widely used by people from all walks of life in many parts of the world.

Since the appearance of smartphone and the subsequent explosion of mobile apps, low-cost or free chat and social messaging apps have proven themselves as a cheap alternative to operator-based text messaging via SMS. Many messenger apps offer features such as group chats, the exchange of graphics, video and even audio messages as well as stickers or emoticons. (Clement, 2019)

According to this author, WhatsApp, now owned by social network Facebook, is one of the most popular mobile social apps worldwide, with 1.6 billion users accessing the WhatsApp messenger on a monthly basis in July 2019. The specific feature focussed on in this article is

the group chat, which enables a group of people, all of whom have to have the app installed on their phones, to be invited by the initiator of the group (known as the administrator). Once the invitation has been sent, the invitee is automatically added to the group, with no time lag or possibility of refusing to join. Once included in the group, any members who do not wish to remain have to select the option of leaving it. This makes setting up the group an instantaneous act, which, as long as all invitees are happy to be included, renders it conducive to a speedy set-up.

The practices described in section 3, based on current usage on the private market at least on the Canary Islands of WhatsApp groups for the coordination of the interpreting services for an assignment demonstrates the incorporation of existing technology that requires no retraining or preparation on the part of the interpreters, and ensures, if used properly, seamless communication between members of the team, regardless of their location at any given time. This improves their image as professionals, by showcasing professional expertise (Sunnari & Hild, 2010) at all stages of the event, when even the most seasoned organizer will much appreciate not having to visit all the booths with updates (see 3.2, below). It also boosts the all-important teamwork needed to do a good job. Luccarelli's words "Needless to say, [professionalism] also requires collegiality, the will and willingness to get along with colleagues. In other words, it goes far beyond the necessary skill to transmit a message from one language to another" (Luccarelli 2004: 2)" is redolent of Herbert's adage (1952: 81) that "An interpreter who is not good in team work is not a good interpreter", which holds good under any circumstances, no matter what the degree of technological input.

### **3. Instant messaging services, such as WhatsApp, before, during and after assignments**

In this section, we shall describe how WhatsApp groups can help facilitate communication and service provision at each of the three stages mentioned, from the point at which a team of interpreters is put together to cover an event right through until the service has been invoiced and paid. This description is based on how practitioners already incorporate messenger apps, in this case, WhatsApp, into interpreting assignments, in the preparation, execution and follow-up stages, to communicate amongst the team and also to channel information from the organizers to the interpreters, and vice versa. Specifically, we will concentrate on how it can facilitate the role of the consultant or chief interpreter (AIIC, 1999), whose role is to ensure "a high-quality service adapted to the client's needs while obtaining optimum working conditions for the interpreters at each conference)". These AIIC guidelines constitute the basis of sound professional practice, whether the interpreters concerned are AIIC members or not. Thus, once contact has been made by the event organizer, the chief interpreter will ascertain the initial details (see AIIC, 1999), and initiate contact with the other interpreters who make up the team.

#### *3.1 WhatsApp group use before the assignment*

Once the lead interpreter for the specific assignment has offered the option (confirmed or not) to team members (by whatever means) and they have accepted it, the setting up of a WhatsApp group is a quick and efficient way of relaying all subsequent information, through the confirmation and preparation stage.

On the first day of the assignment, and in the all-important half an hour prior to commencement (AIIC, 1999), messages to the group can help alleviate the tension by keeping everyone informed. Thus, if the first member of the team, and indeed of each booth, confirms their arrival via the group, sound checks – including those needed to confirm that the equipment

is correctly set-up for relay in all directions – can be performed on all consoles, fixed and roving microphones, in good time. Similarly, any input from the organizer, preferably to the chief interpreter, but in all events to any member(s) of the team, is shared in real time with all other team members. This is always useful, but particularly so if the booths in the venue are not adjacent to one another. This is sometimes the case, as they will often be positioned in accordance with the space available, which may be dictated by elements such as fixed seating, emergency exits and others, with the booths connected by long stretches of cables. Given that both visual and physical access to different booths working at the same event is sometimes limited, instant messenger services can really help to bridge the physical gap. In this sense, last-minute information can be gathered and shared by whoever is best positioned to do so. Examples include, but are by no means limited to, the names and positions of the participants in the opening ceremony or initial panel, which are often subject to last-minute changes as a result of unexpected variations in the schedules of politicians and other dignitaries; up-to-date lists of participants or delegates, and the companies, bodies, institutions or organizations they represent, also prone to last-minute changes and of vital importance in meetings that start with a tour de table round of brief introductions on the part of participants.

### *3.2. WhatsApp group use during the assignment*

During the assignment, instant messaging helps to solve, or clarify, a wide range of issues, from resolving terminological questions, ambiguities or pronunciation-based uncertainties, to confirming which booths are taking relay from whom, thereby alerting specific booths to the fact that they are acting as pivots for a particular session or presentation. Although it might be assumed that this role has already been decided as part of the preparation phase, the situation can change on the spot. The following two examples illustrate situations in which this might occur: firstly, when a speaker has realised – on arrival at the conference – that the interpreting provided enables them to speak in their mother tongue rather than the language suggested by the conference organizers, and secondly, where a speaker has a particularly strong accent that makes it more difficult for interpreters working from their C language to understand; they may well decide to take relay from their B language, if available from another booth, having previously planned to work direct from the speaker. Inter-booth coordination is vital in these cases, as the AIIC guidelines (1999) remind us:

Also, in a team where all the working languages are covered in each booth, there can be no excuse for systematic relay or the sudden absence of a given language combination. This can happen if there has been insufficient consultation between booths. The chief interpreter or team leader is responsible for coordinating inter-booth arrangements, and must therefore be kept informed of what is proposed.

Another specific point at which real-time on-line communication can be invaluable is if the event finishes with the reading of a statement or declaration, as a summary of the work completed, future commitments and activities or a wide range of different aspects. On these occasions, the document in question will often be read out, and tends to be a carefully-worded text that has been negotiated between all parties, ensuring that all sensitivities are covered, and subsequently will often be finely-nuanced. Access to this document, even a few minutes before it is read, makes a considerable difference to the effort required by the interpreters at the end of the day to ensure that it is interpreted accurately and reflects the intended meaning exactly. However, the exact final wording is often worked on until the very last minute. In these cases, being able to take a photo of the document and posting it on the group, or having one sent to the chief interpreter by the organizer and then posting, can make the difference between having a text to prepare, or at least interpret at sight, and having to interpret on the fly a text

that will often be delivered at high speed.

### *3.3. WhatsApp group use after the assignment*

Once the event has finished, the chief interpreter is likely to thank all team members for their services. Where s/he already has the invoicing details, they will be passed on straight away to the team, together with (re-)confirmation of any additional overtime or other questions related to the service performed that may have arisen during the event. The group chat is also an excellent way of keeping all team members up-to-date with all billing details, formats, submission details and any other related information (billing arrangements can often be more complex than one might think). All the interpreters in the team are encouraged to send a message to the group once they have been paid. This helps all involved keep track of payment and, should any member(s) of the team not receive payment when the others have, alerts them, and the chief interpreter, to the need to take appropriate measures. It is considered good practice for the chief interpreter to send a further message thanking all members of the team once again, once all payments have been received and the job can be considered completed.

While it is true that all the activities listed in section 3.3 could just as easily be carried out by email, for example, channelling them through the WhatsApp group has a number of advantages, of which we will name a few. Although email can be accessed on today's smartphones, and often very easily, in a group chat there is no need to double-check that all the members of the team are included as addressees. Instant messenger apps lend themselves to multiple, short messages, rather than the somewhat longer formats more usually associated with email (often with greetings and signing-off formulae). These quick-fire, short messages in real time normally ensure that less time is wasted if several people pose the same question(s). In our experience, it is also the case that this instant messenger format often fosters a sense of camaraderie among the team that helps to boost the general feeling that we can all help each other out at any stage of the assignment as required; a welcome feeling in a stressful profession.

## **4. Conclusions**

The article has presented, in general terms, uses made of instant messaging apps, specifically WhatsApp groups, as a means of enhancing coordination within teams of interpreters in current interpreting practice in the private market in the Canary Islands. Said practice has proved its worth both in facilitating communication in real time between the different members of the team, on each occasion, and in streamlining contacts with the organizer or client. In this sense, the article aims to inform instruction and research actors (cf. Setton, 2007), as well as other practitioners. Future research in this area will be based on specific case studies, to illustrate in more detail how useful this type of group messaging can be in a wide range of situations before, during and after conference interpreting assignments, as well as examining the cognitive load that dealing with messages in the booth may entail.

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