
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Does Style Matter in Remote Interpreting: A Survey Study of Professional Court Interpreters in Australia

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ABSTRACT

In court interpreting, what it is said and how it is said are equally important in face-to-face settings. However, little is known about the views on the content and the form of the interpreted utterances in remote settings. Drawing on questionnaires collected from Australian professional court interpreters, this study investigated the perceptions, views, and professional decisions related to the reproduction of speech style and other linguistic features in remote interpreting. Mode of interpreting and condition of video and audio-only interpreting were compared. The NVivo software was used to analyze qualitative data collected from questionnaires. The findings revealed that speech style and discourse markers have implications for the accuracy of court interpreting in remote circumstances. Most of the respondents held favourable views on rendering stylistic features while interpreting remotely.

KEYWORDS

Remote interpreting, speech style, court interpreting, professional interpreter, mode of interpreting, video interpreting, telephone interpreting

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1. Introduction

Remote interpreting is vastly regarded as a situation in which the interpreter provides interpreting services without being physically present in the same location as the speakers (Braun 2016). Many scholars have studied the use of remote interpreting in legal proceedings across many countries (see Braun 2013, 2017, 2019, 2020; Braun and Taylor 2012; Braun et al. 2018; Kelly 2008; Rosenberg 2007; Seeber et al. 2019; Wang 2018b; Xu et al. 2020). In Australia, with the COVID-19 situation, courts and legal professionals have adapted to the remote option through the application of virtual courtrooms and the inclusion of remote interpreters. During the lockdown, practitioners were requested to interpret via video link or telephone. However, the quality of remote interpreting in the specialized field is rarely discussed.

Court interpreting is widely recognized as one of the most specialized discourses. Such discourses are commonly characterized as a hybrid as a result of contact between legal systems, cultures, and traditions (see Lee 2009a; Robinson 2005), power dynamics in the courtroom (see Wagner and Cheng, 2011; Wagner et al., 2014), the complexity of linguistic features (see Berk-Seligson, 2002, 2012, 2017; Hale, 2004, 2009), the diversity of subjects and specialized knowledge covered by the law, and the sociolinguistics and pragmatics of courtroom discourses (see Charrow et al. 2015; Doty 2010; Gibbons 2014; Jacobsen 2003, 2004; Liao 2012, 2013; Shi 2011, 2018).

In court interpretation, how it is said is equally important to what is said. Court interpreters were requested by professional codes of conduct to reproduce the propositional content and the speech style of the original utterances in the interpreted discourse in an exact way as the original speaker. Existing studies (see Lee 2009; Lee 2009b, 2009c, 2015; Jacobsen 2003, 2008, 2012) revealed conflicting views on the reproduction of speech style and other linguistics features in face-to-face court interpreting. Moreover, many experimental studies (see Berk-Seligson, 2002, 2012, 2017; Hale, 2004, 2009) have shown the disregard for speech style and

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markers, as evidenced by omission and alteration in the interpreted courtroom interactions. However, the research topic is far from exhaustive. Little is known about the perceptions and views related to speech style and other linguistic features in non-European languages in remote conditions. Therefore, this research question deserves scholarly attention as the issue is connected to the provision of quality court remote interpreting services and sufficient communication in virtual courts and tribunals.

This paper investigates the prominent views and professional decisions held by Australian professional interpreters in regard to speech style and other linguistic features that impinge upon the accuracy of court interpreting. The term “court interpreting” is defined as interpreting services provided by professional interpreters in court-related proceedings, and “professional interpreters” refer to interpreting practitioners with NAATI credentials. Previous studies have focused on aspects of the manner of speech in face-to-face settings, but the same topic on remote working conditions is rarely discussed. This paper aims to fill the gap in knowledge and practice of interpreted manner of speech in remote interpreting.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech style

The term “speech style” is often used interchangeably with the term “manner of speech”. Although often mentioned in a variety of scholarly research, the term “manner of speech” has not yet been consciously defined. According to many dictionary resources¹, manner of speech can be broadly defined as the way in which words or phrases are used or uttered. In the field of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, manner of speech functions as ‘contextual coordinates of talk’ (Maschler & Schiffrin 2015: 326). Drawing on existing discussions on the manner of speech, this paper defines the manner of speech as the manner in the utterances were produced. It involves a range of particular modes of verbal expression such as markers, fillers, hedges, backtracking, false starts, as well as register, tone, and intonation. Manner of speech is perceived as a form of speech or an array of linguistic features associated with a particular social situation, subject matter, or characteristic of a particular speaker.

In the context of court interpreting, manner of speech represents the manner or style a speaker expresses the propositional content. It is important that the court hears the oral evidence given in a language other than English rendered as closely as possible to that provided in the original utterances, in terms of both content and the style. Existing studies (e.g., Berk-Seligson 2002; Blakemore 2002; Blakemore & Gallai 2014; Hale 2002, 2004, 2007; Hale & Stern 2011) have argued that manner of speech is equally important in achieving accuracy as it is often employed strategically by opposing counsels in the courtroom to present a favourable version of facts and associations to make their legal reasoning stick. Furthermore, the choice made by professional interpreters in relation to speech style and other linguistic features may have implications for the quality of court interpreting and, nevertheless, a just outcome. However, little is known about the perceptions and views held by professional court interpreters with regard to professional decisions and strategies related to these linguistic features and other practical aspects of the accuracy of court interpreting, especially in remote settings.

2.2 Accuracy of court interpreting

Accuracy of court interpreting is a matter of equity and justice. In Australia, the right to an interpreter has been written into many official legislative and regulatory documents at federal, state, and local levels (see Federal Court of Australia 2015; Judicial Council on Cultural Diversity 2017, 2019 and 2022; NSW Supreme Court 2019). In bilingual courtrooms, when one party does not speak a mainstream language, an interpreter is required to bridge the language barriers between different language communities. The accuracy of interpreting is paramount to achieving justice (Hale et al. 2022: 2). In adversarial courts and tribunals where complex speech events occur, the high level of accuracy is not only concerned with propositional content but, more importantly, associated with nuanced sociolinguistic and pragmatic matters. For instance, speech style and markers have been strategically used by legal professionals and other court participants to achieve a certain intention. The strategic use of markers and stylistic features challenges the interpreters’ competence to reproduce a linguistically accurate rendition with matching pragmatic equivalents.

2.3 Remote interpreting

Remote interpreting is described as a situation in which the interpreter provides interpreting services without being physically present in the same location as the speakers (Braun 2016). The remote options have advantages and disadvantages. Existing studies (see Braun 2013, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020; Braun and Taylor 2012; Braun et al. 2018; Kelly 2008; Rosenberg 2007; Seeber et al. 2019; Wang 2018b; Xu et al. 2020) have revealed a number of advantages of remote interpreting, including reduced delays, increased access to trained interpreters in less often requested languages, higher levels of security and anonymity for interpreters and lower costs due to the absence of travel. With regard to limitations of remote interpreting, there are studies (e.g., Kelly 2008; Lee 2007; Määttä 2018; Wang 2018b; Hale et al. 2022) highlighting poor quality equipment, inadequate working conditions and remuneration for interpreters, lack of clear protocols, difficulties with turn management and coordination, lack of visual cues with regards to telephone interpreting, and extra communication challenges for all involved. Moreover, studies on the quality of remote interpreting (e.g., Braun 2020; Koller & Pochhacker 2018; Moser-Mercer, 2003, 2008; Napier, Skinner & Braun 2018; Skinner et al.

¹ see Collins Dictionary, Oxford Living Dictionaries, and Random House Kernerman Webster’s College Dictionary in Note 1.

2018) also unveiled negative aspects of remote interpreting, including higher levels of interpreter fatigue and stress (e.g., Roziner & Shlesinger 2010), physical discomforts such as eye straining in video remote interpreting, a loss of presence (e.g., Moser-Mercer 2005), perceived lack of control, higher levels of isolation and cognitive load and lower levels of motivation.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to canvass diversified views held by Australian professional interpreters on speech style and other linguistic features related to the accuracy of court interpreting in remote settings. It reported the related perceptions, views, strategies, and professional decisions regarding their interpreted manner of speech. Responses were compared with their demographics and professional and educational experience. To increase its breadth of representation, this large-scale survey includes voices from regional interpreters of different age groups with varying experience levels across Australian territories.

3.1 Questionnaire

This survey study used two sets of questionnaires: one for demographics and general knowledge about speech style and discourse markers, the other for views and strategies related to the manner of speech in the interpreted utterances. Each questionnaire comprises fifteen questions.

The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions, text type questions, Likert scale questions, and open comments related to the manner of speech and other practical aspects of accuracy of interpreting in courts and tribunals. Respondents were asked about gender, age, education, and professional experience with court interpreting, as well as their knowledge and views about the rendition of the manner of speech and the issues related to the accuracy, such as markers, speech style, and non-verbal cues.

3.2 Participants

A call for participants was circulated via the National Authority for Accreditation of Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) and the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) Directory. Considering the significance of accreditation as the basic requirement for court interpreters in Australia (Hale, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011; Stern, 2018), a panel of credentialed interpreters was selected and mostly contacted by e-mail. The level of accreditation and experience varied among the panel of participants. Since Chinese languages, including Mandarin, Cantonese, and other minority variations, were the largest non-English language community and among the most frequently requested languages from court clients in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 and 2021)²The choice of participants centered on interpreting practitioners who are native Chinese language speakers, including Mandarin (37), Cantonese (6), Hakka (2), Wu (4), Min Nan (2), and other minority Chinese languages, on ensuring the diversity of language community. Each interpreter was invited to fill out two online questionnaires hosted on UNSW Qualtrics and distributed via a unique personal link. Fifty interpreters were randomized into four groups by mode of interpreting and condition of video and audio interpreting. Four groups were simultaneous interpreting (SI) with audio-only, simultaneous interpreting (SI) with video, consecutive interpreting (CI) with audio-only, and consecutive interpreting (CI) with video.

In total, one hundred questionnaires were collected. To ensure the response rate of this survey study, a unique access code that linked to each participant was used to distribute questionnaires via the UNSW Qualtrics platform so that the researcher could access each response and notify respondents of answers that were not properly recorded during the follow-up interview. The high response rate of 100% is believed to reflect a growing interest in multilingualism and multicultural society in Australia.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Gender, age range, and base location

Among fifty responses to the demographic survey, the professional interpreters were predominately female (43 out of 50). In terms of the age range, 47% of the respondents were aged between 35 and 44. In terms of the base location, 55% of the professional interpreters were based in NSW (55%), followed by VIC (21%), WA (12%), and QLD (12%). From the response rates, it is revealed that the gender and age range of most of the interpreters who responded to surveys were female interpreters in their 40s, predominately based along the eastern coastlines in Australia. The results are shown in the figure below.

² ABS (2016). 2016 Census on Multicultural. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/media%20release3>

ABS (2021). Language used at home (LANP).

<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/guide-census-data/census-dictionary/2021/variables-topic/cultural-diversity/language-used-home-lanp>

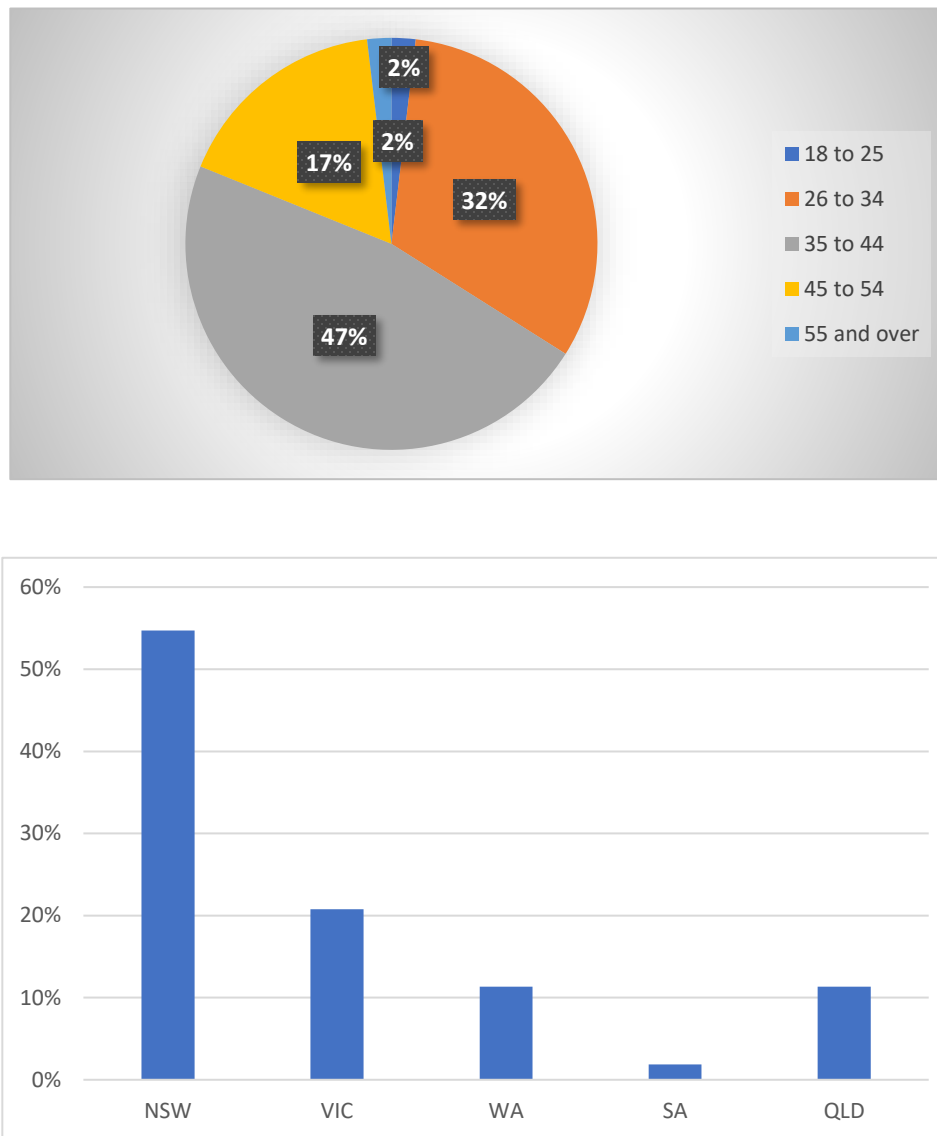


Figure 1. Age and location of respondents

4.2 Certification, education, and professional experience

To examine the level of certification, respondents were asked about the category of their NAATI credentials. 48 out of 50 had mostly achieved Certified Interpreter, with the rest reporting Certified Provisional Interpreter.

Level of NAATI certification	Responses
Certified Interpreter	48
Certified Provisional Interpreter	2

Table 1. Level of NAATI certification

Furthermore, professional interpreters were also asked about their specialized training. Questions were phrased to elicit knowledge about the highest level of formal education and the type of qualifications achieved. In terms of the highest education, the results showed that all respondents had at least attended the undergraduate level of higher education, with 81% that attended the postgraduate study and 19% that attended the undergraduate study. In terms of the type of qualifications earned, 64% obtained their Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma or Master's Degree in Interpreting & Translation, and 17% obtained the same level of qualifications in other disciplines. 19% earned at least a Diploma/Advanced Diploma of Interpreting.

Highest level of formal education	Percentage
Postgraduate	81%
Undergraduate	19%

Table 2. Highest level of formal education

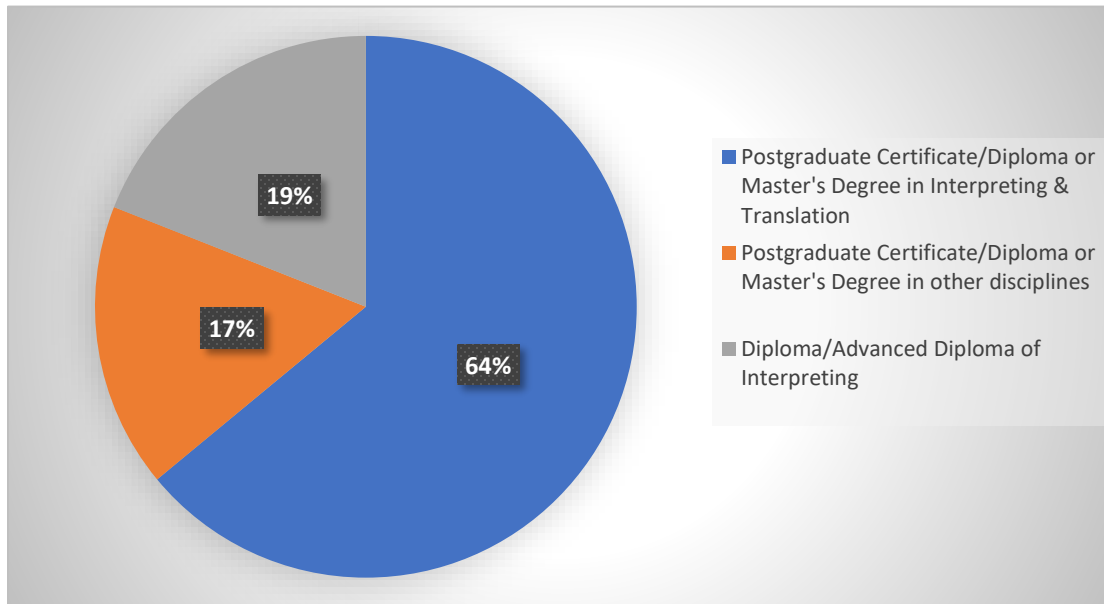


Figure 2. Highest qualification obtained

Moreover, respondents were also asked whether they had received specialized training in law & legal interpreting. 26 indicated "never", whereas 24 respondents indicated "yes," with many giving the name of the course and the organizing institution and some detailing the length and main content of the training. The results indicated that all respondents were highly educated with at least an Advanced Diploma obtained in the subject of interpreting or translation or other related subjects such as medicine and law, accompanied by a specialized training module in court or legal interpreting.

Specialized training in law and interpreting	Responses
Never	26
Yes	24

Table 3. Specialized training in law and interpreting

To acquire knowledge about the participants' professional experience, the respondents were asked about their exposure to court interpreting and the frequency of court interpreting requests. In terms of the exposure to court interpreting, 57% of respondents had at least 5 years of experience in courts and tribunals, with 25% of responses indicating over 10 years of experience. In terms of the frequency of requests, 33% indicated more than once a week, and 35% indicated more than more a month. Furthermore, the mode and condition of remote court interpreting were also asked. The results showed professional interpreters had a reasonable level of experience with court interpreting.

4.3 Experience with remote interpreting

To investigate the level of experience with remote interpreting, questions were designed to elicit answers about the mode and the condition of interpreting, as well as the interpreter's personal preference. In terms of the experience with remote interpreting, 48 out of 50 indicated positive responses. Among those who had remote interpreting experience, 75% had been requested to interpret remotely in court-related settings, whereas 25% only had done court interpreting in the face to face settings. Among those who had interpreted remotely in court-related settings, 55% responded that they had interpreted more than 15 times/meetings. In terms of the mode of remote interpreting, 63% reported that they had worked on both modes, whereas 25% and 13% only interpreted simultaneously or consecutively in remote settings.

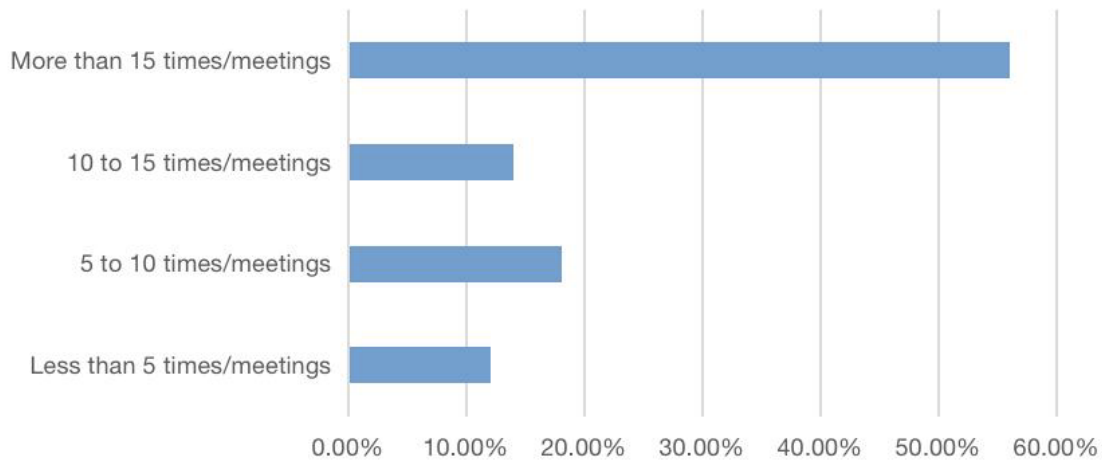


Figure 3. Remote court interpreting experience

To obtain detailed information about their remote interpreting experience, further questions were asked about the platform used for remote interpreting and their preferred condition while interpreting remotely. In terms of the platform for remote interpreting, 69% of the respondents reported the use of general platforms with interpreting features, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, whereas 27% of the respondents gave out names of other platforms, with another 4% reporting the use of dedicated interpreting platforms, such as Interprefy.

In terms of the condition of remote interpreting, interpreters were asked about their personal preference for video vs. audio-only conditions. 66% responded that they preferred interpreting with visual cues so that they could see the speaker while interpreting. However, 24% of responses showed no particular preference for video or audio.

The results showed that a significant majority of the court interpreters had interpreted remotely, mostly on general platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams and preferably with visual cues.

4.4 Perceptions of the speech style

In order to find out the prevalent perceptions on the manner of speech and other practical aspects of court interpreting, definitions of terms, which were frequently used in the literature on court interpreting, were provided to respondents. These terms are “discourse marker” and “manner of speech”. In this study, manner of speech is defined as the way or the style of words or sentences used by a particular person in a given situation. In relation to each term, the respondents were asked to choose what they believed to be the expression and the best rendition of such terms from sentence examples in courtroom discourse. The respondents were allowed to choose more than one option as they saw fit.

In regards to discourse markers, respondents were asked to indicate possible discourse markers in the courtroom sentences using the text box in the questionnaire. The first question in the questionnaire was designed to check the understanding of discourse markers. Out of all 50 responses, 12 skipped the question due to lack of knowledge, and 5 reported “I don’t know” or “not sure about it” in the text box. Among the remaining 33 answers, 5 only indicated the sentence number, and 2 only indicated the number of discourse markers in the sentences. Among the 26 valid answers, 2 were partially wrong, 2 were all wrong, and the remaining 22 were correct. Among the 22 correct answers, 15 respondents indicated four discourse markers, 3 respondents specified five discourse markers, 3 respondents denoted 3 discourse markers, and 1 only identified one discourse marker.

The second question in the questionnaire was asked to examine whether respondents regarded these markers to serve any function in courtroom questions. Interestingly, although many were not sure about what discourse markers were or specified what exactly markers were in the sample questions above, 90% of respondents regarded markers as “useful” or “functional” in courtroom questions. 10% indicated “undecided” or “it depends” in their responses. Furthermore, they elaborated on the functions listed below.

Functions (Responses)	Sample answers
Strategizing (4)	"Barristers' questions are usually tricky." "Sometimes markers can buy the barrister/witness some time in court. " "Questions are structured more logically."
Attention-grabbing (8)	"Place it catches people's attention." "Grab the attention, induce a preferred answer."
Emphasis (6)	"Stress the point." "It emphasizes the subject to whom speech is directed." "To emphasis the meaning."
Place-holder (4)	"to initiate the start of a conversation." "They are basically gap fillers or starters of a sentence or question. " "They mark the start of a proposition or a question."
Cues (14)	"They indicate the speaker's tone of voice, emotion, etc. " "It tells me where the conversation is." "In addition, it sometimes conveys subtle meanings and reveals the attitude or underlying tone of the speaker. "

Table 4. Functions of discourse markers perceived by respondents

4.5 Views on the rendition of the speech style

To investigate the views on the rendition of the speech style, questions were designed to illuminate their attitudes towards the manner of speech in court discourses. In regards to the rendition of the manner of speech and its relevance to the accuracy of remote interpreting, respondents were asked to choose the most appropriate rendition of the manner of speech in three courtroom sample sentences. In the first sentence, 4 out of 50 respondents chose to disregard filler and hedges in interpreted utterances. In the second sentence, 2 out of 50 responses ignored repeats in the reproduction of the manner of speech. In the third sentence, 3 out of 50 opted for the omission of false starts and self-corrections in the rendition of original court utterances. Moreover, respondents were asked to explain their choices in the text box below.

Category	Reasons	Sample answers
Accuracy	Completeness	"Interpreters have to interpret everything that's said accurately. Not summarising." "Fillers and hesitations are part of what's been said originally. I won't alter that information just to make the interpretation sound smoothly. "
	Content and style	"Interpreters need to interpret everything the client says, including the style of the source speech." "mimicking the respondent as best as the interpreter can in the court." "BE TRUE TO THE MANNER OF SPEECH OF ORIGINAL LANGUAGE"
	Verbatim	"Interpreters need to translate word by word."
Relevance	Implications for court decisions	"if it's a criminal case, the witness's manner of speech may affect his or her impression on the jury." "hesitation influences jury judgment"
Professional ethics	Code of Conduct	"To interpret as accurately as we can is part of the interpreter's Code of Ethics; we are not supposed to summarize what the LOTE or the Professional said. " "Under the Code of Conduct, Interpreters are supposed to accurately convey what's been said without addition or subtraction."
Place-holder	Not to render	"However, repetition of words does not necessarily need to be translated. I don't translate gap fillers, like uh, errh, because they don't contain any meaning. "

Table 5. Views on the rendition of the manner of speech

4.7 Strategies and professional decisions related to the speech style in remote settings

To elucidate professional decisions related to the manner of speech in remote settings, respondents were asked to briefly describe their strategies and judgment on the rendition of markers and stylistic features in courtroom discourses. Although several respondents took issue with the expression "strategy", reporting that "I don't think I had any particular strategy for things like that", all respondents reported their views on dealing with markers and speech style while interpreting remotely once the researcher clarified what the question was intended to address. Results are shown in the figure below.

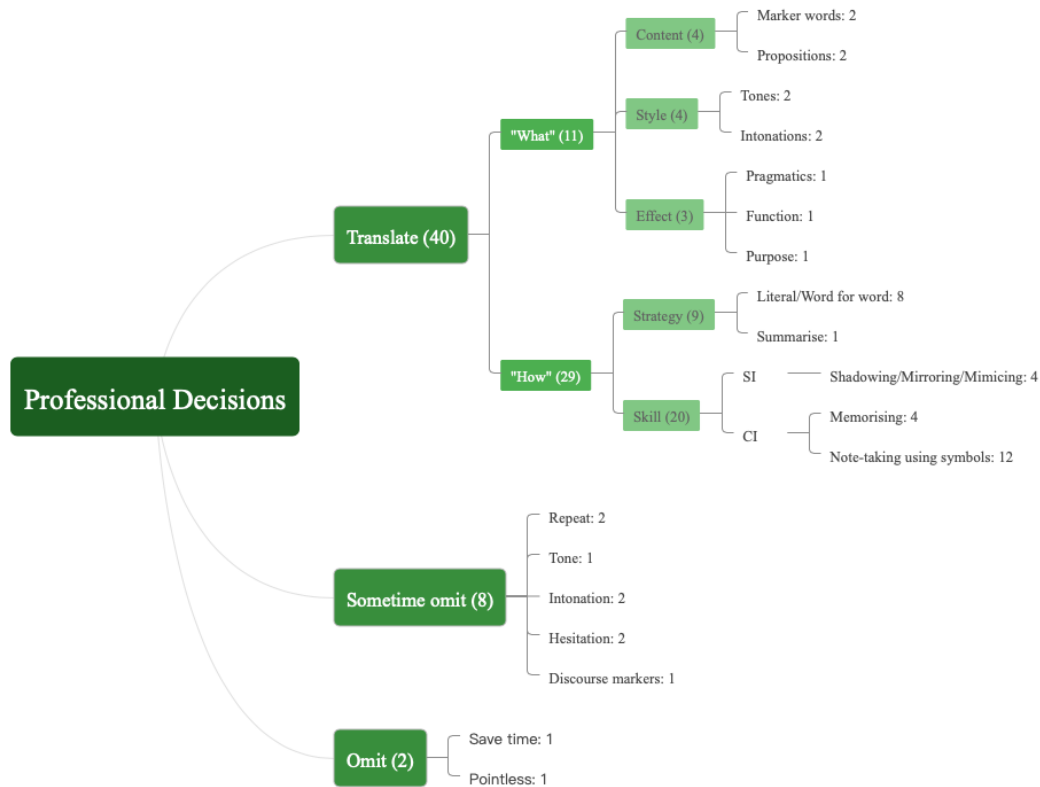


Figure 4. Professional decisions related to the manner of speech in remote settings

Out of all 50 responses, there were 40 mentions of the decision to "translate" or render discourse markers and speech style "as soon/close/complete as possible" or "depending on the situation or context", 8 mentions of the judgment to "some omit" and 2 mentions on the determination to "omit" to "save time", or simply regard manner of speech as "pointless". Among the 40 respondents who decided to reproduce manner of speech, details were provided on what and how to handle manner of speech in interpreted utterances. In terms of the decision on what should be rendered faithfully, answers can be further divided into content, style, and effect categories. Regarding the content, 2 respondents highlighted "marker words", whereas the other 2 respondents stressed "propositions" in their interpretations. Considering the style, 2 responses underlined "tones", while the other 2 respondents specified "intonations". Concerning the effect, there was one particular mention of the "pragmatics", the other emphasis on the "function," and another indication of the "purpose". In terms of the judgment on how the manner of speech should be properly reproduced, responses fell into two categories: strategy and skill. Considering the question of strategy, 8 respondents specified "literal" or "word for word," and 1 suggested "summarising". Concerning skills involved in the reproduction of manner of speech, answers were provided according to the mode of interpreting. In regards to simultaneous interpreting, there were 4 mentions of the "shadowing" skill to "mirror" or "mimic" speech style and markers. With consecutive interpreting, there were 12 mentions of the "note-taking" skill "using symbols" and 4 mentions of "memorizing" skill without the help of notes. According to word weight and frequency distribution calculated using the NVivo software, the results were illustrated as shown in the word cloud below.

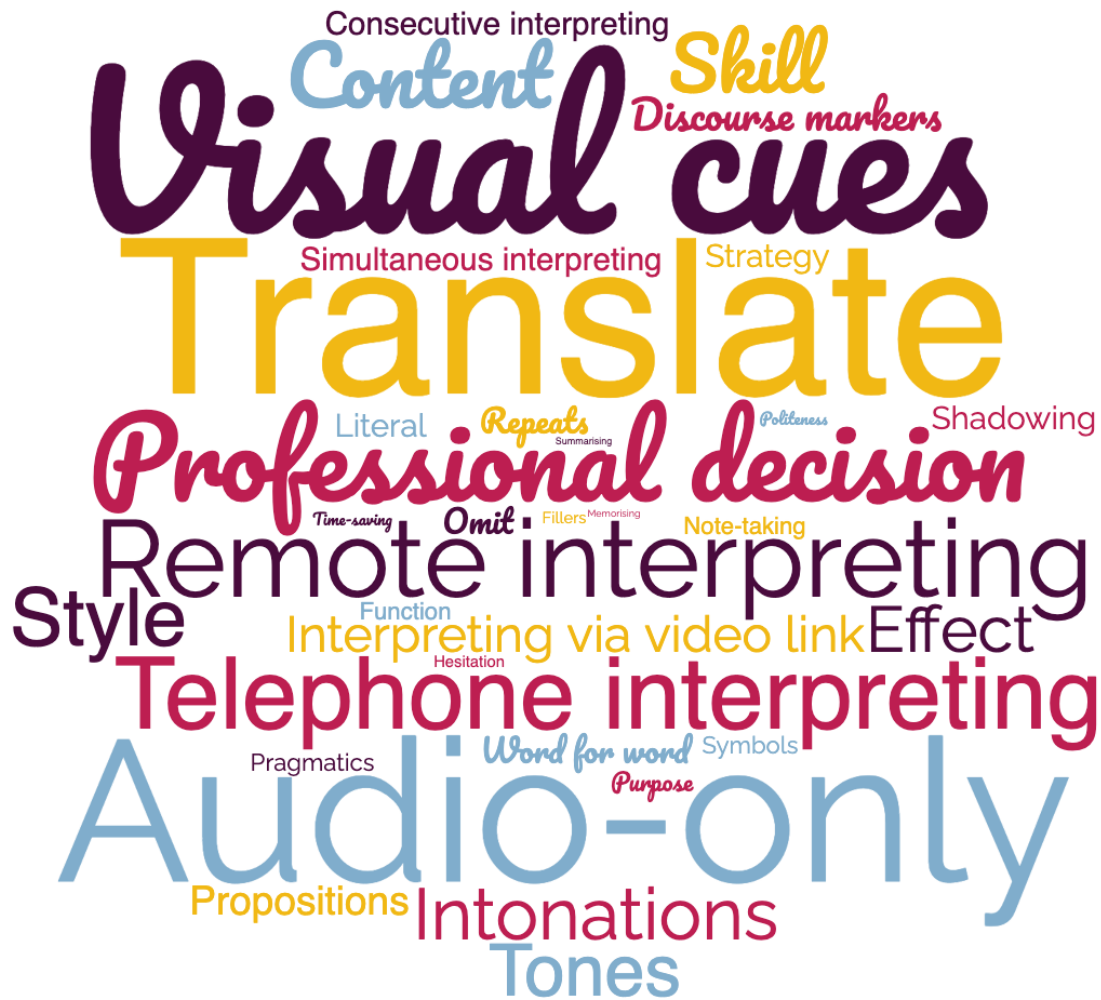


Figure 5. NVivo word cloud by word weight and frequency

5. Conclusion

Manner of speech is considered an important factor in the assessment of the accuracy of court interpreting. In court interpreting, the manner of speech involves discourse markers, speech style, and other linguistic features. To achieve the accuracy of court interpreting, it is required by professional ethics that interpreters should reproduce everything that has been said in courts. Given the covid-19 situation and the availability of the remote option in courts, this study examines the views and professional decisions on the rendition of the manner of speech in remote court interpreting.

The results of this study reveal that most professional interpreters hold favourable views on the reproduction of the manner of speech and other aspects that impinge upon the quality of court interpreting in remote settings. Considering the strategic use of speech style and markers in courtroom discourse, it is important that manner of speech should be interpreted in the same way as it is in the original utterances and thus included in the assessment of the accuracy of court interpreting, particularly in remote settings. Court interpreters should be sensitive to linguistic nuances conveyed by the manner of speech in the source language and search for pragmatic equivalents to a particular illocutionary point in the target language with matching force and effect. With respect to the manner of speech, one assumption is that professional interpreters can make conscious efforts to attend to speech style and markers in the original utterances and strategically reproduce them in the interpreted utterances.

This study only reported data extracted from two sets of online questionnaires. Further experimental research is required to further explore views and findings from these questionnaires and the future implications they hold for remote legal proceedings. Such research can be particularly helpful in the specialized training practice of court interpreters in remote settings with regard to professional ethics and discretion in linguistically nuanced and complex communicative court scenarios.

Due to the limited scope of this survey study, the interpreter behavioural data related to the actual rendition of the manner of speech in court settings have not been fully contemplated. However, issues arising from the findings of this study require to be further examined to improve the professional practice of remote court interpreting. The sociolinguistic and pragmatic layers of complexity in interpreted courtroom discourse on remote conditions deserve immediate scholarly attention. Discussions between professional and pedagogical practice informed by experimental studies may contribute to the enhancement of the quality of court interpreting, particularly in remote settings.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes:

1. From the Collins Dictionary, manner of speech is defined as “[phraseology] the manner in which words or phrases are used”. From the Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary, manner of speech is referred to as “[legal phraseology] manner or style of verbal expression; characteristic language”. From the Oxford Living Dictionaries, manner of speech is regarded as “a particular mode of expression, especially one characteristic of a particular speaker or subject area.”

2. The term “audio interpreting” used in the paper refers to the condition of remote interpreting where interpreters cannot see the speakers, similar to telephone interpreting. The term “video interpreting” used in this paper refers to the condition of remote interpreting where interpreters can see the visual cues of the speakers.

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