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Perception vs reality: how first-hand experience during the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced spoken-language conference interpreters' attitudes towards Remote Simultaneous Interpreting in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how spoken-language conference interpreters across the five regions of Africa experienced Remote Simultaneous Interpreting (RSI) during the Covid-19 pandemic, how their experiences influenced their previous perceptions of RSI, as well as their perceptions of RSI's future viability on the African continent. The study found that the online meeting platform mostly used in Africa (Zoom) functioned adequately for interpreting, but that additional functions could significantly aid interpreting. Furthermore, it was found that the effectiveness of Simultaneous Interpreting Delivery Platforms (SIDPs) and Zoom depended largely on external factors such as internet connection, bandwidth, power supply, and the behaviour of speakers and participants during meetings. Despite the challenges, the majority of the 140 questionnaire respondents believed that RSI would continue to be used after the Covid-19 pandemic. From the respondents' perspective, RSI's greatest advantage was that interpreters could work from the comfort of home, thereby eliminating difficulties and stress associated with travel across the African continent. RSI's greatest disadvantage was found to be poor sound quality that is common as a result of the use of inadequate sound equipment and the inappropriate behaviour of participants in virtual meetings. Before the pandemic, most (80%) of the interpreters who participated in this study had had no first-hand RSI experience; and over half (63%) were either ambivalent or had negative perceptions about RSI. By November 2022, only 0.7% of the interpreters who participated in this research study were completely averse to the idea of providing RSI; 77% indicated that they would be happy providing a combination of in-person interpreting and RSI; 53.6% indicated that they were very happy providing home-based RSI, and 9.3%, stated that they would be happy to provide home-based RSI exclusively. Regarding interpretation hubs, only 24.3% indicated that they would prefer to provide RSI from a hub with technician support. This study concludes that the first-hand experiences of most surveyed interpreters using RSI in Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic positively influenced their perceptions of and attitudes toward RSI despite the negative aspects of technostress, disconnectedness from booth partners and clients, and poor sound quality.

Keywords: Remote Simultaneous Interpreting; RSI; in-person; on-site; virtual; technostress; sound; disconnectedness; behaviour.