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The Disembodied Conduit: A Cognitive-Pragmatic and Interactional Analysis of Remote Interpretation

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The systemic integration of remote interpretation modalities—Over-the-Phone (OPI) and Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)—into global communication infrastructures has precipitated a paradigmatic realignment within interpreting practice, necessitating a fundamental reconceptualization of interpreter role, competence, and interaction management. This research employs a rigorous qualitative, practice-based methodology to situate the distinct exigencies of remote English-Spanish interpretation within a synthesized theoretical framework that integrates cognitive load theory with principles of interactional linguistics and incorporates insights from media richness theory and communication accommodation theory. Drawing upon the authors' extensive engagements within a high-volume, on-demand service environment, we investigated the compounded cognitive-pragmatic pressures induced by contextual deprivation, relentless domain-switching, and the management of high-stakes, emotionally-laden discourse, all of which are recognized antecedents of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue. The interpreter's strategic compensatory adaptations are found to be a form of pragmatic engineering, a professional necessity for mitigating the severe constriction of paralinguistic and kinesic channels inherent in technologically-mediated communication. The concluding synthesis advances critical implications for pedagogical reform, professional support infrastructures, and future empirical research, advocating for the formal scholarly and institutional recognition of remote interpreting as a specialized field of inquiry with distinct theoretical and practical parameters.

Keywords: remote interpreting, disembodiment, cognitive load, pragmatic engineering

The Remote Interpreter as a Disembodied Conduit

Interpretation is a complex cognitive-linguistic task modeled by Gile (1995/2009) as effort-driven operations constrained by limited processing capacity. The rise of remote platforms for high-demand language pairs like English-Spanish has introduced novel constraints that reconfigure interpreter-mediated communication (Wadensjö, 1998; Pöchhacker, 2016). Despite pervasive deployment across critical sectors, remote interpreting remains underexplored from an integrated cognitive-pragmatic perspective (Braun & Taylor, 2012; Napier, 2018).

This analysis conceptualizes the remote interpreter as a "disembodied conduit"—a role that epitomizes yet interrogates the classical conduit model by eliminating co-present interactional resources. Operating in resource-depleted fields characterized by Daft and Lengel's (1986) "lean" communication medium, interpreters are divested of environmental, kinesic, and proxemic cues (Metzger, 1999; Goodwin, 2000). This disembodiment

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forces interpreters toward more visibly coordinated roles (Roy, 2000; Angelelli, 2004) as they navigate constrained ecologies requiring terminological precision and pragmatic fidelity. The analysis contributes to interpreting studies by asserting remote interpreting as a discrete sub-discipline requiring specialized competencies, while enriching interactional linguistics through examination of sense-making in resource-depleted environments.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach

The analysis is grounded in extensive professional praxis encompassing thousands of Over-the-Phone (OPI) and Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) sessions across healthcare, legal, emergency, and corporate domains. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological methodology, it treats operational challenges and strategic adaptations as "practice-based evidence" (Angelelli, 2004) within the practitioner research tradition (Hale & Napier, 2013).

Four theoretical pillars provide complementary perspectives:

Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory (Gile, 2009; Seeber, 2011; 2017) explains the severe mental strain of remote interpreting resulting from contextual deprivation and abrupt topic switching. Extended to on-demand remote work characterized by consecutive interpreting and "cold-start" situations without preparation, this framework acknowledges the distinct cognitive burden of remote environments, offering implications for training and performance evaluation.

Interactional Linguistics and Dialogic Role

This perspective (Wadensjö, 1998; Roy, 2000; Davidson, 2000) reconceptualizes interpreters as active coordinators and meaning co-constructors rather than neutral conduits. Remote settings challenge this coordinating function by removing physical presence, body language, and shared space (Metzger, 1999; Bot, 2005), disrupting fundamental interaction mechanics like turn-taking (Sacks, 1974) and requiring re-examination of role perception and participant footing.

Phenomenology of Disembodiment and Vicarious Trauma

Disembodiment—mental presence amid physical absence—has serious implications for interpreter performance and mental health (Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012; Dean & Pollard, 2013). The Demand-Control Schema (Dean & Pollard, 2001; 2013) helps identify remote-specific stressors and coping strategies. Combined with emotional labor theory (Hochschild, 1983) and exposure to traumatic content, this creates risks for compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995), highlighting needs for improved training and support systems.

Media Richness and Communication Accommodation Theories

Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) identifies OPI and VRI as "lean" media lacking the cues of face-to-face interaction. To compensate, interpreters employ Communication Accommodation Theory strategies (Giles, 2016)—adjusting speech patterns to build rapport and ensure understanding despite technological limitations.

Strategic Navigation of Resource-Depleted Interactional Fields

Cognitive Marathon and "Cold Starts"

The consecutive model predominant in remote work imposes significant working memory burdens exacerbated by unpredictable workflows (Gile, 2009; Chernov, 2004). "Cold starts"—joining calls without

context—create immediate cognitive spikes (Seeber, 2011; Díaz-Galaz, 2015), forcing rapid inference of speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986) while processing content. Interpreters respond with predictive loading of domain-specific terminology, accessing interconnected semantic fields through long-term working memory structures (Ericsson & Kintsch, 1995; Christoffels & De Groot, 2005). While VRI offers marginal visual priming (Braun, 2019), this advantage is often negated by technical limitations.

Rapid domain-shifting between disparate contexts (e.g., emergency calls to technical consultations) imposes immense cognitive flexibility demands, creating "task-switching costs" (Monsell, 2003; Koch, 2018) and necessitating conscious mental resets between calls. Failure can cause pragmatic interference across social frames (Goffman, 1974), compromising neutrality and professionalism.

Pragmatic Engineering in Mediated Channels

With pragmatics impoverished by remoteness (Grice, 1975; Verschueren, 1999), interpreters become "pragmatic engineers" constructing meaning through constrained channels (Mason, 2009; Baraldi & Gavioli, 2012). Faithfully conveying pragmatic intent—such as emotional nuance in medical or emergency contexts—requires sophisticated awareness in both languages (Tipton & Furmanek, 2020; Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

Compensatory strategies differ by modality: OPI demands "vocal proxemics"—artistic control of vocal qualities to convey relational cues normally expressed physically (Argyle, 1988). VRI permits "limited kinesic mirroring" (Bavelas, 2000) but requires careful calibration to maintain professionalism (Bot, 2005) despite technical disruptions (O'Brien, 2020).

Turn-taking management presents particular challenges in multi-party remote interactions. Explicit role-marking ("Interpreter") and metacommunicative interventions become necessities to clarify participant footings (Goffman, 1981) and manage speaker-ambiguous environments, with VRI's potential advantages often nullified by technical issues.

Terminology Management in Contextual Vacuum

The unpredictable range of specialized fields combined with on-demand service precludes preparation, creating "unprepared conditions" (Risku, 2002) contrasting with conference interpreting protocols (Setton & Dawrant, 2016). Practitioners must possess rapidly accessible mental repositories for numerous sub-specialties, aligning with "verticalization" requirements (Gouadec, 2007) and creating substantial retrieval loads (Liu, 2008).

Continuous self-directed preparation and transparent metacommunicative intervention ("The interpreter requests clarification...") represent essential strategies, applying the coordinator role (Wadensjö, 1998) to ensure accuracy (Hale, 2007) and prevent compromises to safety or integrity in high-stakes settings (Flores, 2012; Berk-Seligson, 2002).

Emotional Labor and Disembodiment Paradox

Exposure to traumatic content represents an occupational hazard (Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012; Dean & Pollard, 2013) uniquely configured in remote modalities. Interpreters must manage emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) while accurately rendering raw affect, leading to potential dissonance and exhaustion (Zapf, 2002).

Disembodiment creates a paradoxical dynamic: OPI's physical distance may provide psychological buffering (Rosenberg, 2022), while VRI's visual component can intensify emotional exposure (Mellinger & Hanson, 2019), elevating vicarious trauma risks (Figley, 1995; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Mitigation requires cognitive-emotional boundaries, decompression rituals, and peer support to prevent burnout (Maslach, 2001).

Remote Interpreter as Specialized Pragmatic Agent

Remote interpreting constitutes a discrete professional praxis synthesizing cognitive demands (Gile, 2009; Seeber, 2017), interactional complexities (Wadensjö, 1998; Roy, 2000), and technological constraints (Braun, 2019; O'Brien, 2020). The remote interpreter functions as strategic cognitive conductor and pragmatic agent co-constructing meaning within constrained fields—a role expansion aligning with viewing interpreters as active participants (Angelelli, 2004; Inghilleri, 2005).

Strategies like "vocal proxemics" and "explicit role-marking" demonstrate compensatory mechanisms in resource-depleted environments, extending interactional linguistics into digital domains and showing how coordinating roles transform toward greater explicitness.

Current training curricula oriented toward co-present settings (Sawyer, 2004; Setton & Dawrant, 2016) inadequately prepare practitioners for remote work. Specialized pedagogical programs should include:

(a) Cognitive Agility and Endurance Simulations replicating unpredictable on-demand work with domain-shifting and cold-start scenarios;

(b) Explicit Multimodal Pragmatics Training covering vocalics for OPI and combined vocalics/kinesics for VRI, grounded in nonverbal communication research (Knapp, 2014; Jones, 2015);

(c) Mandatory Mental Health and Resilience Curriculum addressing vicarious trauma and burnout with evidence-based strategies and organizational safety protocols, framed within Demand-Control Schema (Dean & Pollard, 2013);

(d) Techno-Ethical Competence and Critical Awareness covering platform proficiency and ethical dilemmas of disembodiment, data privacy, and communication limitations (Napier, 2018; O'Brien, 2020).

These integrated pillars form essential foundations for professional, resilient remote interpreting practice.

Conclusions

Remote English-Spanish interpreting represents a profession of intense cognitive and emotional difficulty operating at the intersection of language, cognitive science, and technology. Success requires skills beyond bilingual fluency—including mental flexibility for information overload, interaction management in disrupted conversations, and emotional resilience with traumatic content.

This analysis, employing integrated theoretical perspectives, delineates the field's special challenges and interpreters' advanced strategies. In critical situations from emergency calls to legal proceedings, remote interpreters serve as essential human links enabling understanding.

The academic and professional communities should formally recognize remote interpreting as a specialized area within interpreting studies and a significant research topic for interactional linguistics and communication science. Despite being technologically obscured and often treated instrumentally, the cognitive, social, and emotional demands of this work require focused attention through: empirical research documenting job pressures; specialized training programs addressing unique challenges; and institutional support systems protecting interpreter well-being. These steps are crucial for supporting practitioners in this demanding, vital work, ensuring clear, compassionate communication across digital and linguistic divides.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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