### Speed in simultaneous interpreting

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**Abstract**

Simultaneous interpreting (SI) is a highly complex cognitive process which aims to deliver a complete and accurate rendition of the original message in real time. Myriad factors can influence the process, speed being one of the factors most frequently considered by practicing interpreters as a major challenge. Against this background, we carried out a study to find out, empirically, what speed interpreters are currently confronted with. The aim of the study was to ascertain whether speed is high nowadays as is commonly stated in the literature and claimed by professional interpreters. Forty-five and sixty-two English and French speeches written to be read were randomly selected from the Plenary Sitting of the International Labour Conference (ILC) and the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), respectively, at two moments in time, 2013 and 2016, for the former, and 2011 and 2016 for the latter. The written texts of the speeches were downloaded from the ILO and HRC intranets, then the oral speeches were listened to from the webcast and the texts checked against delivery. Thereafter, the average speed was calculated in words per minute. The findings suggest an average delivery rate of 149 and 161 (HRC) and 142 and 130 (ILC), with a high variability between the different speeches. Results are similar for French and English speeches. These findings show that average delivery rate of speeches delivered at the HRC is very high, while the rate of those delivered at the ILC Plenary Sitting is high. The presenters will explore the potential implications of these results for the profession, training and multilingual communication.

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**Methods and Materials**

1st study:
- 2 speeches per day, one delivered by a member state and one by an NGO, over two weeks of HRC 16th session (2011); total sample of 20 EN.

2nd study:
- 21 from review of Belgium (11 in FR, including speech by government, and 10 in EN).
- 21 from review of Namibia (11 in EN, including speech by government, and 10 in FR).

3rd study:
- 45 speeches from 2013 and 2016 ILCs.
- Choice of 2013 (instead of 2011 like HRC) due to availability of ILC proceedings.
- 22 speeches from 2013 (12 in EN, 10 in FR).
- 23 speeches from 2016 (14 in EN, 9 in FR).
- Speeches by speakers representing governments, employers and workers.

- All speeches randomly selected.
- Both female and male speakers.
- Written texts downloaded from ILO and UNOG websites, speeches listened to and texts checked against delivery.
- Total number of wpm calculated for each speech.

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**Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IO/Year</th>
<th>Lowest rate</th>
<th>Highest rate</th>
<th>Average (wpm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HRC/2011/EN</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRC/2016/EN</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRC/2016/FR</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILC/2013/EN</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILC/2013/FR</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILC/2016/EN</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILC/2016/FR</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chart 1. Average delivery rates for HRC and ILO**

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**Introduction**

- Speed is one of the most prominent challenges mentioned by professional conference interpreters working in International Organizations (IOs). This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that these speeches are written speeches to be read, implying high density and low redundancy.
- Speed identified as main stressor by professional interpreters, in general, and UN interpreters, in particular.
- Although general feeling is that there has been an increase in the delivery rates, no new or revised reference value, as compared to the recommended rates of 100 to 130 wpm, has been established.
- Only few studies have tried to measure the actual delivery rate to which interpreters are exposed.
- With a view to elucidating if and how speed increased, the authors conducted 3 studies.

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**Discussion**

- Average speed at HRC challenging (140-160) and difficult (>200).
- Average speed at ILO moderate (120-140) and challenging.

HRC:
- Increase in average delivery rate between 2001 and 2016 from 149 to 162 wpm.
- Confirms general feeling amongst interpreters that speed is increasing in this UN forum.
- Minimal difference between languages in 2016 for EN speeches and 160 for FR speeches.

ILO:
- Clear decrease from 142 wpm in 2013 to 131 wpm in 2016.
- Encouraging trend.
- A result of increased awareness amongst speakers.
- Minimal difference in 2013 between FR and EN speeches: 142 wpm for FR and 141 wpm for EN.
- In 2016 higher speed in FR (134 wpm) than EN (127 wpm).

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**Conclusions**

- Average speed at ILC and HRC higher than recommended speed of 100 to 130 wpm.
- Increase over the years at HRC.
- Implications for training and for the profession.
- Profession undergoing changes (in fora analyzed in this study and in many intergovernmental venues).
- Interpreters face increasing difficulties to perform their task and meet quality criteria.
- Impact on exchange between participants in international conferences.
- Negative impact on communication and multilingualism, two concepts that are at the heart of IOs.
- Fast reading of highly dense and well-crafted statements difficult to comprehend for listeners of same language of delivery, let alone through interpretation.
- Observed high speed due in part to limited speaking time available to speakers at IOs.

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**Recommendations**

- Provision of adequate working conditions for interpreters.
- Increased awareness of need to control speed, especially when reading from written texts.
- Need of training institutions to adapt curricula to developing realities to equip trainee with necessary strategies.
- Training should be embedded in structured approach to acquire sub-skills and strategies to be applied.
- Learners should be gradually exposed to varying factors of increasing complexity, speed being a factor that exacerbates all other difficulties.
- Comprehensive crosscutting progression schedule could be designed at training institutions to cope with speed.