The Sustainability of Interpreting as a Profession in the Era of Artificial Intelligence (early access; full release by the end of February 2026)

Will an automatic interpreter or an augmented interpreter survive the 5th Industrial Revolution?

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Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Interpreting: Professional Interpreters' Perspectives

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that 60% of jobs in advanced economies are at risk of being replaced by Artificial Intelligence (Howarth 2025). Interpreters and translators rank first among the top 40 occupations with the highest AI applicability score, with 98% of their work activities overlapping with frequent Copilot tasks that demonstrate relatively high completion and scope scores. However, tests conducted with Google's GEMINI 1.5 Flash and 2.0 Flash confirm that AI translation continues to sacrifice accuracy, logical coherence, and contextual awareness (Pereira 2024a, 2024b). Similarly, following internal trials with Wordly, the World Health Organisation has decided to restrict the use of AI to internal meetings under strict human supervision. Against this backdrop, we conducted a survey with interpreters in Greece, Cyprus, and Italy to explore their perceptions of the profession's future. The findings reveal widespread apprehension about the sustainability of interpreting as a career. At the same time, a number of respondents acknowledged that AI, if appropriately integrated, may support interpreters in their work and contribute to enhanced performance.

Keywords: *AI, interpreters, interpreting, Wordly, realtime captions, AI in interpreting, WHO, Google's GEMINI 1.5 Flash, Google's GEMINI 2.0 Flash*

1 Artificial Intelligence and interpreting

One of the main goals of Artificial Intelligence includes speech recognition and translation in any form. It suffices to google the definition of Artificial Intelligence and the first definition that will pop up is "the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages" (oxfordreference.com). According to NASA, artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the ability of a computer or machine to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence. This includes capabilities like learning, reasoning, problem-solving, perception, and language understanding. Essentially, AI systems are designed to mimic human cognitive functions and make decisions or take actions based on the data they receive. Does this mean that AI is trying to replace human translators or interpreters? A 2024 survey by the Society of Authors found that 36% of translators lost work due to generative AI and 77% expect their income to be negatively affected (Financial Times 2024). The growing shift toward AI post-editing is reshaping job roles—translators are increasingly reviewers, adapters, and creative editors rather than primary translators (The Guardian 2024).

What is more, in a recent study (Tomlinson et al 2025), interpreters and translators rank first among the top 40 occupations with highest AI applicability score, with 98% of their work activities overlapping with frequent Copilot tasks with fairly high completion rates and scope

scores. Other occupations with high applicability scores include those related to writing/editing, sales, customer service, programming, and clerking. Thus, interpreters and translators are followed by other knowledge work occupations such as historians, writers and authors, CNC tool programmers, brokerage clerks, political scientists, reporters and journalists, mathematicians, proofreaders, editors, PR specialists, etc. The 40 occupations with the lowest AI applicability scores include occupations that require physically working with people (such as nursing assistants, massage therapists), operating or monitoring machinery, and doing other manual labor. In the same study three types of work activities tend to have particularly positive feedback: those involving writing and editing text (edit documents, write material), researching information and evaluating or purchasing goods. The writing and editing activities are performed by various professional categories including interpreters and translators. In contrast, work activities involving data analysis or visual design have been found to have the worst feedback. These results suggest that Copilot is better at the writing and researching parts of knowledge work than its analysis and visual components. Furthermore, the data of the analysis do not indicate that AI is performing all of the work activities of any occupation. The overlap between AI capabilities and various occupations is very uneven. There are definitely some occupations for which many work activities have some overlap with demonstrated AI capabilities. But even when there is overlap, the task completion rate is not 100%. Thus, even when there is overlap between an AI capability and a work activity, it does not mean the work activity is done to its full extent all of the time. In conclusion, the findings of the Tomlinson et al July 2025 research project confirm the use of AI by both translators and interpreters with AI receiving positive feedback in writing and editing tasks and a strong indication that AI is used as a complementary tool and does not perform all the work activity.

Real-time translation is provided by platforms such as Wordly, Interprefy AI, Kudo AI, and Evenly. A recent study from Oregon State University (Agostinelli et al. 2024) introduces Simul-LLM, an AI-based framework that trains large language models (LLMs) for simultaneous translation (SimulMT) (Chiaming 2025). Conventional neural machine translation (NMT) systems require complete sentences or passages before generating an output. This contrasts sharply with simultaneous interpreting, where human interpreters must anticipate, infer, and plan ahead to ensure that their speech is fluid and comprehensible to the audience. Current machine translation (MT) systems cannot replicate the dynamic cognitive process of human interpreters, who use different techniques and strategies such as restructuring phrases, compressing redundant information, and adjusting delivery speed, to maintain coherence in real time.

To address this gap, SimulMT aims to enable AI to process speech incrementally, generating translations as soon as partial input becomes available. Unlike traditional NMT, which translates only after the full text is provided, SimulMT predicts words in real time. The Oregon State University research team developed Simul-LLM, a system that fine-tunes existing LLMs, such as OpenAI's GPT models, to handle SimulMT. Their framework allows AI to process spoken input incrementally, meaning it can translate as soon as it receives a portion of a sentence rather than waiting for the whole sentence to be completed. The model uses a "wait-k" strategy, deciding when to start translating based on a fixed delay (e.g., waiting for three words before translating). This technique helps balance accuracy and speed, mimicking how human interpreters handle the challenge of incomplete information (Chiaming 2025).

Early results from Simul-LLM show that AI can generate high-quality translations with minimal delay, particularly for languages that share similar grammatical structures, such as

English to Spanish, while more structurally divergent language pairs, such as English to German or Japanese, remain difficult as AI finds it hard to predict words that will appear later in a sentence.

In some cases, AI outperformed traditional SimulMT systems, particularly when using speculative translation techniques like Speculative Beam Search (SBS), which predicts multiple possible translations at once and selects the most likely translation. But despite these advances, researchers acknowledge that AI still makes mistakes that human interpreters would not — such as missing nuanced cultural references, failing to adjust for tone, or struggling with ambiguous phrases (Agostinelli et al 2024, Chiaming 2025).

Following the above AI is clearly not yet ready to replace human interpreters. In particular, recent tests employing speech-to-text automatic translation were conducted by Pereira (2024a), following the release of the most recent stable version of Google's GEMINI 1.5 Flash. The main findings of these tests highlighted the general inability of AI to process and generate meaning in natural language, or to analyze and summarize spoken discourse in its entirety. Reported shortcomings included misinterpretations, incomplete utterances, failure to preserve natural speech comparable to the original, as well as poor vocabulary and syntax. Comparable results were observed in the tests carried out with a newer version, Google's GEMINI 2.00 Flash (Pereira 2024b).

It should be emphasized that the test with Google's GEMINI 2.00 Flash (released on 5 February 2024) (Pereira 2024b), conducted within the European Union, reached the general conclusion that the system is capable of conveying the overall idea of the speech but fails to reproduce natural-language output. Among the disadvantages reported were that sentences are frequently left unfinished during translation and that the system becomes confused when words from other languages are introduced in addition to the declared source language. More specifically, it fails to recognize the pronunciation of English words by non-native speakers, and it struggles when faced with code-switching or changes of speaker. Its principal advantage, apart from cost, is speed.

In this regard, the report on AI interpretation by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2025 is enlightening (WHO Report 2025). The report was initiated and conducted by the WHO interpretation team (INT) as a response to requests from WHO Technical Units (TUs) for recommendations and advice on the use of AI interpretation as a means to maintain multilingualism at meetings where funding was limited. After an initial assessment a posteriori of a few cases where AI interpretation was used but was found to be of poor quality to allow for use in WHO meetings, INT performed a thorough study on AI interpretation in all 6 official languages that focused on the quality of AI interpretation and in particular on reputational risks. The AI interpretation provider selected was Wordly. INT developed specific speech selection criteria, including accents, numbers, acronyms, figures of speech, cultural references and speed. 3 speeches from the 2024 World Health Assembly involving various difficulties were selected for each language. The assessment results were surprisingly low for all languages. They ranged from 5% to 83% with only 1 interpretation out of 90 obtaining a passing grade. Not a single interpretation was free of reputational risks, which ranged from 1 to 9 in a single speech. The overall average was 46%, with interpretation into English at 51% faring better than other languages. Interestingly, interpretation into English had the highest total number of reputational risks. Interpretation into Chinese had, at 40%, the lowest average grade. Interpretation from English was also the highest graded at 54% but, surprisingly, French as a source language had the

lowest average at 36%. The test clearly showed difficulties in language identification and code-switching. Other than taking the time of a sentence or two to switch from one language to another, WORDLY shadowed the English-speaking Chair, interpreting him from English into English, and often inaccurately.

In terms of specific difficulties, AI interpretation did well with speed. However, high speed affected completeness. There was a significant time lag between the beginning of each speech and the beginning of the interpretation. This lag extended at times to over 32 seconds while in human interpretation, it is usually no more than 5 seconds. Therefore, the last sentences were not always interpreted. Proper nouns that are well-known problem triggers in simultaneous interpreration (Petrocheilou 2022) proved to be a challenging difficulty for AI as well. Names of countries and people suffered most. While human interpreters use context to deal with this kind of difficulty or circumvent it by omitting an unfamiliar name of a President and simply using their title, AI interpretation did neither. The most distinct examples include "Brunei Dar Essalam", which was interpreted from Chinese into Arabic as "the brunette Russel", "Greece" as "Chris" and "Haiti" as "Heidy" in all languages. Also, "Dr Moeti", the AFRO Regional Director, who is a woman, was misgendered as a man and interpreted as "our African" in Arabic. Even more seriously, when Hamas was referred to as having perpetrated terrorist attacks in the statement of Spain, it came out as an incomprehensible "Ifer" in the Arabic interpretation, ("Ifer" does not mean anything) while the AI transcription mentioned the "US" instead of Hamas. Such errors are serious reputational risks as they ridicule the speakers and the countries involved and could even cause serious diplomatic incidents. Figures were also a major stumbling-block for AI as are for human interpreters as well (Petrocheilou 2022). Some figures came out correctly; many were however incorrectly transcribed and pronounced, especially when there were many zeroes involved and even in dates. Complex grammar and syntax were more problematic in some languages than others, particularly from Arabic. A notable example was in one speech, where the speaker mentioned the reduction in maternal mortality "by about 70%" which was translated as "to about 70%" in French and Russian. Last but not least, the rendering of technical terms was problematic. "Transmission of polio" was interpreted from Arabic as "transportation", due to the similarity of the 2 words in Arabic. In a statement in French, "hepatitis" became "Ebola" in Arabic. From Chinese "stratified health" was interpreted into all languages as "airplane health". Expression, delivery and pronunciation were also poor. The conclusion of the report was that AI interpretation is still at an experimental stage and is not fit for use in WHO meetings with external stakeholders. In line with that guideline, AI interpretation may be used in internal meetings involving WHO staff only, provided staff who understand the languages used are present to avoid major miscommunication.

After all the tests run so far, it has become obvious that AI remains unsuitable for sensitive or critical interpreting environments like courts, medical consultations, or diplomatic conferences. All the forenamed studies highlight its shortcomings in handling cultural nuance, accents, nonverbal cues, and reasoning—especially in high-stakes settings (Chiaming 2025). Although AI-based translation is less costly, it is offered at the expense of accuracy, logical coherence, and contextual awareness. In critical domains such as legal, medical, or diplomatic communication, errors in interpretation can result in legal disputes, incorrect medical diagnoses, or even diplomatic conflicts (Beliakova 2025; Song 2025). Therefore, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) and the American Bar Association (ABA) strongly advise against using AI for real-time interpretation in court, labeling it "unacceptably unreliable" (ATA 2025).

According to the American Translators Association (ATA), the largest association of language professionals in the United States (ATA 2025), "many would like us to believe that AI can solve all our problems. But as far as interpreting and translation in high-stakes settings are concerned, it isn't there yet". The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) also addressed the Ohio Supreme Court (2 June 2025) with a letter providing guidance on the use of AI and machine assisted translation recommending that all AI-generated translations be reviewed for accuracy and completeness by human translators (NAJIT 2025). "The stakes are simply too high. When AI makes a mistake that results in a mistrial, a wrongful conviction, a negative outcome in a hospital, or even death, who will be responsible? The AI company that sold it will have disclaimed all liability. Are our courts, hospitals, schools—and ultimately taxpayers—ready and willing to shoulder such a risk?", concludes the recent article by ATA (2025).

2 Our survey on the views of interpreters on AI

The findings of a recent study conducted primarily with interpreters who are members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) (total number of participants: 496), concerning the readiness of conference interpreters to accept and use digital technologies and artificial intelligence (Chiaming 2024), reveal a cautious openness towards new technologies, accompanied by concerns about cognitive load, emerging ethical issues, and the impact on interpreters' traditional skills. The study highlights the need for comprehensive training aiming at strengthening interpreters' technological competences while upholding ethical standards, as well as the need for further research into the cognitive implications of AI-generated content and the evolving role of interpreters in a technology-driven environment.

Similar findings emerged from responses to a questionnaire (Petrocheilou 2025a; Petrocheilou 2025b) distributed in April 2025 to members of the Hellenic Association of Conference Interpreters (SYDISE), the Greece–Cyprus Region of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), and the Italian Association of Professional Interpreters (Assointerpreti). In total, 49 conference interpreters participated (N = 49). The largest age group was 61–65 years (30.65%), followed by 56–60 (22.4%) and 46–50 (12.2%). Women constituted 87.8% of respondents and men 12.2%. Regarding professional experience, 53.1% reported more than 31 years of practice, and the majority of the respondents had over 21 years. The sample thus comprised highly experienced interpreters.

When asked whether they believe that the interpreting profession will be replaced by AI by 2030, 55.1% of respondents indicated that it might be replaced, 8.2% believe it will definitely be replaced, and 36.7% consider that the profession will not be affected by AI (Figure 1).

According to a BBC survey, 80% of jobs are expected to be replaced by AI by 2030. Do you think conference interpreting is included in the list of jobs to be replaced by 2030?
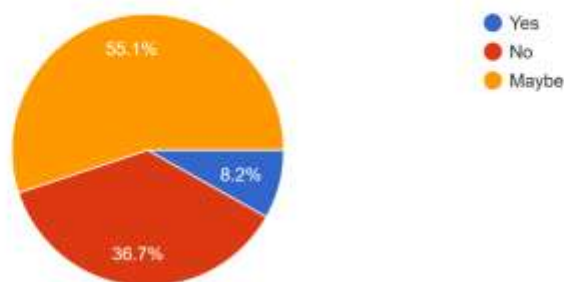
49 responses

Figure 1

When asked if they believe the profession will be replaced after 2030, the overwhelming majority of the respondents, i.e. over 70%, thinks this is very probable [7-10 on a 1-10 scale] (Figure 2).

If you do not believe that conference interpreting is one of the jobs to be replaced by 2030, do you think it will be replaced later?
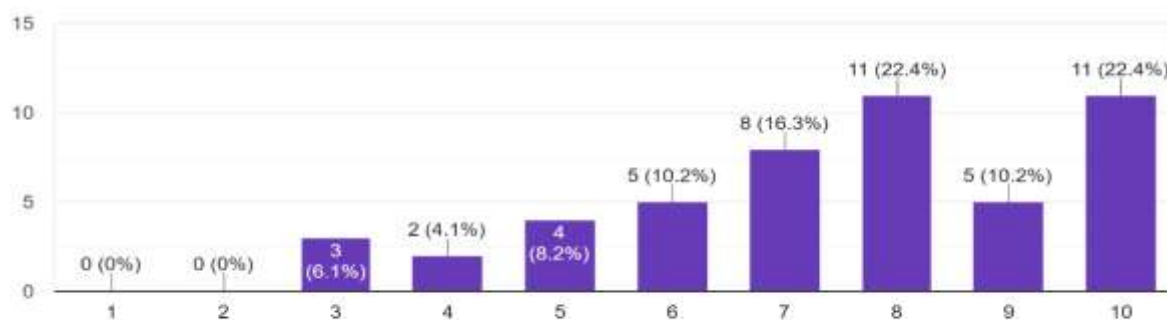
49 responses

Figure 2

When asked to elaborate on their answers, respondents provided extensive explanations, highlighting the extent to which this is a matter of concern for professional interpreters. In total, 49 responses—corresponding to the number of participants—were recorded. Several noted that conference interpreting cannot be entirely replaced. Many emphasized the rapid development of AI, anticipating that it will substitute interpreters in certain situations, but not in those where human interaction is crucial. Respondents frequently stressed the unstoppable nature of technological progress and the speed at which AI is evolving. Others argued that high-level assignments will always require human interpreters. One participant specified that conference interpreting will remain essential in domains requiring the highest levels of accuracy and professional reliability (e.g., pharmaceuticals/GMP, education, design). Another respondent

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suggested that while interpreters may be replaced by automated solutions in virtual meetings, they will continue to be employed in high-level in-person settings. Where more economical solutions are sought, however, AI-based interpreting is likely to be preferred.

In a similar vein, one respondent pointed out that large language models are improving rapidly and that the output of an "artificial interpreter" is unaffected by delivery speed or fatigue. More pessimistic respondents noted that few clients place genuine value on high-quality human interpreting, foreseeing that most assignments requiring only moderate skill will disappear from the market. They also argued that, as AI becomes increasingly accurate, automatic translation will be applied across all languages with growing frequency. Even if the quality is not of the highest standard, they anticipated that users would gradually adapt to new norms and cease to expect premium results. According to this perspective, audiences will eventually accept the absence of human interpreters, as technology enables interpreting under specific conditions for widely spoken languages (e.g., the pre-uploading of conference texts, translated and delivered by synthetic voices). Smaller languages or "exotic language combinations," such as Greek, may take longer to be affected due to limited data resources, but will not ultimately escape this trend. Others drew parallels with the translation sector, where human involvement has already been significantly reduced, and predicted a comparable trajectory for conference interpreting. A particularly noteworthy response referred to high-profile cases of interpreter failure (such as those reported at Mandela's funeral or the 2025 Meloni–Trump meeting), which, according to the respondent, could be exploited by technology companies to cast doubt on human performance and promote AI solutions.

By contrast, more optimistic participants argued that the development of an AI-supported tool capable of replicating the performance of human interpreters will require considerably more time. They emphasized that the "human factor" remains indispensable in communication and doubted that interpreters will ever become entirely redundant. Several highlighted qualities that cannot be replaced by machines, such as the ability to adjust tone of voice, nuance meaning through lexical choice, and facilitate interpersonal connection. Another participant underlined that AI is not yet capable of conveying emotions and subtle linguistic nuances, though it may eventually acquire such capacities. Conversely, one respondent anticipated that AI systems would increasingly succeed in capturing emotions, intentions, and pragmatic subtleties. Others stressed the inherent complexity of language, which in their view renders it unlikely that speech could be consistently and reliably rendered into another language in real time by a machine.

Finally, several respondents expressed broader criticism of AI and computer-assisted tools, claiming that they have contributed to the emergence of a new generation of interpreters who are less qualified than previous cohorts: "less concentrated, more distracted, with considerably less general knowledge, less awareness of history and of matters once considered basic, and, inevitably, weaker command of their mother tongue."

When asked about the main shortcomings of AI in the field of interpreting, 77.6% of respondents identified the lack of contextual adaptability as the most significant limitation, followed by the inability to account for the overall context (69.4%), the high risk of miscommunication (65.3%), monotony and lack of engagement (57.1%), and the accountability gap (46.9%) (Figure 3).
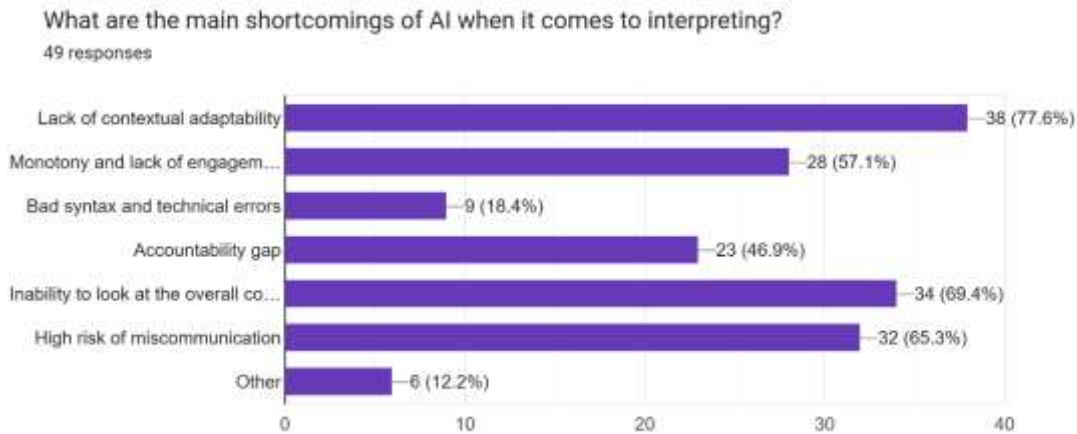
What are the main shortcomings of AI when it comes to interpreting?
49 responses

Category	Value
Lack of contextual adaptability	38 (77.6%)
Monotony and lack of engagem...	28 (57.1%)
Bad syntax and technical errors	9 (18.4%)
Accountability gap	23 (46.9%)
Inability to look at the overall co...	34 (69.4%)
High risk of miscommunication	32 (65.3%)
Other	6 (12.2%)

Figure 3

When invited to elaborate on the option "Other," seven respondents provided additional comments. Several pointed to the absence of intonation and emotion-related nuances in AI-generated output. One respondent emphasized that a machine cannot be expected to genuinely understand a speaker or grasp their underlying intentions—an ability that lies at the core of interpreting. Human interpreters, by contrast, are able to empathize, discern what the speaker seeks to convey, and find an appropriate way to communicate that message. The same respondent further argued that if AI were ever to reach the point of fully grasping a speaker's intention as soon as they take the floor, this would imply that the speaker is entirely predictable and devoid of any element unknown to science. In such a case, they suggested, there would be no need to grant the speaker the floor at all, as their intended message would already be predetermined; the organizers might simply opt to play a pre-recorded video instead. Another respondent highlighted the absence of a legal framework regulating the use of AI in interpreting, linking this gap to the issue of accountability identified in Figure 3. Finally, one participant observed that the robotic tone of AI output often produces an awkward effect on listeners.

When asked about the advantages of AI, the majority of respondents (79.6%) identified its potential use as a supplementary tool in low-impact scenarios as the main benefit, followed by its relatively low cost (69.4%) and high processing speed (24.5%) (Figure 4).
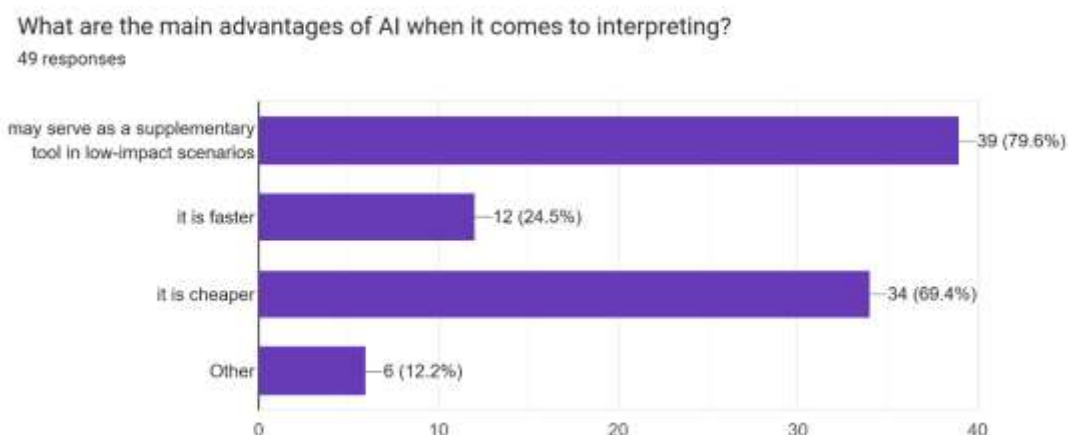
What are the main advantages of AI when it comes to interpreting?
49 responses

may serve as a supplementary tool in low-impact scenarios	39 (79.6%)
it is faster	12 (24.5%)
it is cheaper	34 (69.4%)
Other	6 (12.2%)

Figure 4

When invited to elaborate on the option "Other," six respondents provided additional comments. One respondent noted that AI is available ubiquitously, at any time and for any duration. Another emphasized that AI is often employed by employers or business stakeholders in the interpreting industry as a means of exerting pressure on interpreters to accept lower rates, while stressing that this phenomenon should not be attributed to AI itself. This respondent further observed that, throughout human history, technological advancements have not typically been directed toward the common good unless their widespread adoption also ensured greater profitability; otherwise, such innovations tended to remain accessible only to a limited few. A different respondent suggested that AI may prove particularly useful in highly specialized or technical meetings, while another highlighted its potential to support interpreters in their work and facilitate improved performance.

In response to the question of whether they use computer-assisted interpreting (CAI) or computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, on a scale from 1 to 5, 60% reported using them to a moderate or high degree (3–5), while the remaining 40% reported using them rarely or not at all. When asked which computer-assisted interpreting or translation tool they employ, 77.6% selected DeepL, followed by ChatGPT (44.9%), SDL Trados (42.9%), and InterpretBank (28.6%).

Finally, 85.7% of participants expressed concern about the future of interpreting as a profession. When asked to explain, 49 responses were recorded. The majority expressed apprehension regarding the long-term viability of the profession. Several recurring themes emerged, including technological displacement and decline in opportunities, erosion of professional value and quality expectations, changing roles, generational and professional sustainability concerns and broader linguistic and social trends. As to technological displacement, many respondents feared that advances in AI and related technologies would progressively replace human interpreters, particularly in contexts where precision and nuance are less valued. Some anticipated a sharp decline in job opportunities, with interpreting becoming relegated to niche settings or high-level events, while AI takes over routine assignments. The view that interpreters would increasingly be perceived as a "luxury" rather than a necessity was frequently mentioned. With regard to the erosion of professional value and quality expectations, respondents expressed concern that clients increasingly prioritize cost savings over quality, leading to lower standards and greater reliance on machines. This shift was perceived as eroding both the

reputation of interpreting as a profession and the recognition of human interpreters' unique skills. Several respondents warned that this trend risks normalizing substandard communication outcomes. Amid shifting professional roles, several respondents anticipated a restructuring of the field whereby interpreters would serve less as primary communicators and more as supervisors, proofreaders, or quality controllers of AI-generated output. This prospect elicited ambivalence: some viewed AI as a potentially valuable adjunct that could support and enhance interpreters' work, whereas others feared it would further marginalize their role. Furthermore, generational and professional sustainability concerns were expressed. A significant number of comments reflected anxiety for younger generations of interpreters, who were seen as having limited prospects on a shrinking market. Some senior respondents noted that they would be retired or unaffected personally, but worried about the sustainability of the profession for those entering the field. With respect to broader linguistic and social trends, in addition to AI, respondents highlighted other factors undermining the profession, such as the growing dominance of English as a lingua franca and clients' reluctance to invest in multilingual communication. Some respondents also emphasized the lack of unity among interpreters themselves, which weakens collective efforts to protect and promote the profession.

A smaller number of respondents expressed curiosity rather than concern, viewing AI as a tool that could complement rather than replace interpreters. Others suggested that interpreters will remain indispensable in specific contexts, such as missions requiring consecutive interpreting or situations demanding empathy and human judgment. Overall, the responses reveal a strong sense of uncertainty and insecurity about the future of interpreting. While most participants expect a decline in demand due to technological, economic, and linguistic pressures, there is also recognition of potential new roles for interpreters alongside AI.

3 Conclusion

Amid disruptive developments that raise concerns about the potential disappearance of the interpreting profession, we conducted a survey with experienced conference interpreters to explore their perceptions of the profession's future. The findings reveal widespread apprehension about the sustainability of interpreting as a career. At the same time, a number of respondents acknowledged that AI, if appropriately integrated, may support interpreters in their work and contribute to enhanced performance. Although uncertainty predominates, a subset of respondents maintained that human interpreters will remain necessary for high-impact conferences and for settings in which human interaction and empathy are indispensable. Evidence from trials conducted by the European Union and the World Health Organization with AI-based solutions likewise indicates that current AI-based interpreting solutions do not yet meet the quality standards required for institutional use. Given the rapid pace of AI development, professional interpreters should, however, be proactive rather than reactive. Respondents actually anticipated a restructuring of the profession, with interpreters serving less as primary providers of communication and more as supervisors, proofreaders, or quality controllers of AI-generated output. Accordingly, interpreters are advised to prepare for—and adapt to—this emerging configuration.

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