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CONFERENCE INTERPRETING: FROM *MODERN TIMES* TO SPACE TECHNOLOGY*

Abstract

Based on original sources, both written and oral, the paper offers an overview of the path followed by the profession of conference interpreting since its birth at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference until now, with a diachronic perspective that may serve as a useful compass to forecast its future course.

1. Conference interpretation was born in Paris in 1919

French had enjoyed a virtual monopoly as diplomatic language since the seventeenth century . After the First World War, President Wilson and Premier Lloyd George successfully demanded that English become an official language at the Paris Peace Conference, theoretically on an equal basis with French. The same would later apply to the institutions deriving from the Conference: the League of Nations, the International Labor Office (ILO) and the Permanent Court of International Justice.

Conference services had to be arranged in order to allow the delegates to express themselves, orally and in writing, in either of the two official languages. Since conference interpretation did not exist as such at the time, the organisers had to employ essentially untrained staff who happened to have a good knowledge of the languages and the necessary *culture générale* to interpret the dignitaries of the Conference.

Noone -including the interpreters themselves- had a clear idea of the tasks entailed. They had to improvise and learn on the job. The users, according to some testimonies, felt impressed by the apparently miraculous ability of interpreters to move

smoothly from one language to another. American Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, had the following to say about Paul Mantoux, chief interpreter of the Conference:

> ...No interpreter could have performed his onerous task with greater skill than he. Possessing an unusual memory for thought and phrase, he did not interpret sentence by sentence, but, while an address or statement was being made, he listened intently, occasionally jotting down a note with the stub of a lead pencil. When the speaker had finished, this remarkable linguist would translate his remarks into English or into French as the case might be, without the least hesitation and with a fluency and completeness which were almost uncanny. Even if the speaker had consumed ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes, the address was accurately repeated in the other language, while Professor Mantoux would employ inflection and emphasis with an oratorical skill that added greatly to the perfectness of the interpretation. No statement was too dry to make him inattentive or too technical for his vocabulary. Eloquence, careful reasoning, and unusual style in expression were apparently easily rendered into idiomatic English from French, or vice versa. He seemed almost to take over the character of the individual whose words he translated, and to reproduce his emotions as well as his thoughts. His extraordinary attainments were recognized by every one who benefited by them, and his services commanded general admiration and praise (Lansing: 105-106).

This paragraph, also quoted by Roland in the new version of her book on the history of interpretation (1999: 158), embraces all the key elements of consecutive interpretation (CI): language knowledge, memory, attention, familiarity with the subject, oratorical skills, the ability to empathetically reproduce the emotions of the original speaker and even, however fleetingly, a reference to an embryonic note-taking technique. The results of that *almost uncanny* ability would earn the *general admiration and praise* of an audience which saw the interlinguistic transfer as a feat of *alchemy*, to use J. Delisle's metaphor. Interpreters were required to translate all the statements

from and into the two official languages, and they delivered their interventions standing, from the podium or in the middle of the room. This fact made them highly visible figures in the meetings.

Mantoux and Camerlynck, another prominent interpreter at the Conference, came from the teaching profession. Their interpreting background was limited to interallied meetings during the First World War. That is, they had not been trained specifically for the job. They learned it through practice and they did not consider it a permanent profession.

Jean Herbert, another trailblazer of the profession, interpreted for the French financial authorities at Lloyd George's residence in London in 1917. He no doubt did a good interpretation job considering the circumstances, in particular his youth and lack of training. But he recalls:

> I am grateful that my interpretations were not recorded, because if I heard them now I should certainly blush. However, that was the best that could be done at the time and, strange as it may sound, it was appreciated (Herbert: 6).

A sobering account of that pioneering time, when nobody had a clear idea about the nature of the job or its practicioners nor what to expect from them. Herbert's self-evaluation suggests that mastering this skill required training and the only avaliable then was the on-the-job kind.

2. Simultaneous interpretation began in the 1920s, came of age at the Nuremberg trial and triumphed over consecutive at the United Nations

The interwar period, as David Bowen (1985) rightly pointed out, was consecutive interpretation's age of glory. Nevertheless, other modes were also used, such as whispered interpretation (Bonsal: 23) and, what is more important for the purpose of this paper, simultaneous interpretation (SI) too.

I will very succintly describe some of the attempts at SI, only to show that it began much earlier than the Nuremberg Trials, usually considered as the starting point of simultaneous.

Edward Filene, the Boston entrepreneur, had witnessed the drawbacks of using CI in international conferences in the early 1920s. He soon came up with the idea of a system that could overcome the tedious and cost-ineffective method of succesive oral translations. Filene proposed the idea to Eric Drummond, the League of Nations Secretary General:

> ...May I recall our conversation in Geneva last year with reference to devising a system for interpreting important speeches at the meetings of the League into one or more languages *simultaneously with their delivery*.
>
> We agreed, I think, that if such a system could be devised it would greatly increase the efficiency of the meetings and have important results by way of:
>
> A. Saving the time of the Assembly, which is now delayed for the interpretation of each speech following its delivery.
>
> B. Maintaining the general interest and attention of the members [...]

> C. Enabling all members to understand the speeches *as delivered*, which would greatly increase their effectiveness and permit prompt rejoinder or reference to them on the part of following speakers.
>
> D. Expediting the business of the meetings generally, and creating a greater cohesion or esprit de corps among the members. [...][1]

This reference to the driving force and financial sponsor of the SI experiment explains the reasons for it: the system would save time and, therefore, money; and debates would be more lifelike.

The process went through several phases, but I will refer here only to the SI trials at the 1928 ILO Conference, commenting on the experiment at two levels, the technical and the human. To illustrate the former, I have chosen an official report on the functioning of the full-scale experiment.

> A laboratory has been set up at the International Labour Office for the technical development of the project and the training of a special staff of interpreters in the new art [!], as interpreting simultaneously with a speech is a very different thing from the usual practice and demands a special degree of skill [...][2]

Although technical conditions were still relatively primitive, the essential elements were taken into account. Interpreters had to be placed so that they could *both see and hear* the speaker. They *murmured* into the microphone, which they activated, thus starting the transmission to some 500 listeners equipped with large headphones.

The author of the report was very well aware of the *special degree of skill* required by the simultaneous exercise -indeed, *a new art*- compared with *the usual practice*. If no special training had been required for consecutive interpreters, it was

clear that training was necessary for their simultaneous counterparts. In fact, the organisers of the experiment took the preparatory process very seriously.

The following document describes the first course of SI in history, financially sponsored by Filene. It illustrates the efforts made to prepare the interpreters for that new method, reflecting how accurately the planners, inspired only by their intuition, had anticipated the requirements for training.

> A room in the office building was equipped with the necessary apparatus so that the conditions of the training should approximate as closely as possible to those under which telephonic interpretation would take place at the Conference. [...] At the outset of the course,[...] speeches actually delivered at previous sessions of the Conference were read from the Conference record at a moderate and even rate of speed by one person, while another translated into the telephone to a third, who listened in for the purpose of checking and criticising the translation.
>
> When all the interpreters taking part in the course of training reached a certain stage of proficiency, arrangements were made for actual speeches to be delivered in the style of those made at the Conference, and on subjects connected with it...[...] This gave an atmosphere of reality to the training course.
>
> During the week before the opening of the 1928 session of the Conference a strict examination was held of the eleven interpreters who showed the greatest proficiency. The examination was conducted by three of the higher officials of the Office, who have special knowledge of the translation requirements of the Conference. The interpreters undergoing the examination had to interpret instantaneously a speech on a subject relating to the usual Conference agenda, special attention being paid by the jury to the accuracy and clearness of the translation. The jury decided that nine of the candidates were capable of acting as telephonic interpreters at the Conference...[3]

This comprehensive text is worth a few comments. The training room replicated the actual technical conditions that interpreters would find in the real environment of the Conference. The learning process was structured according to a pattern of gradually higher levels of difficulty until candidates were ready to face real speeches. Candidates took part in the evaluation process during the training period. Actual subjects dealt with in the Conferences were used as training material. Examinations were administered at the end of the course by a jury of high officials familiar with the requirements of the Conference. Accuracy and clearness of the interpretation were the main yardsticks of the candidates' competence.

It is interesting to note that, unlike what happened in the CI market where female interpreters were exceptional,[4] four of the nine successful trainees in the SI course were women. Although there was still a long way to go before the current feminization of the profession, this was a sign of things to come. Curiously, none of the League's interpreters, staff members and free-lancers alike, took part in the course, showing their hostile attitude towards a method that would place them *entirely in the background as mere cogs in a machine*,[5] although this opposition took the form of various *technical* objections.

As a result of all these preparations, in the 1928 ILO Conference *real* SI was used during entire meetings, involving up to seven different languages. The ILO adopted the system for its annual conferences, although not for all the organs, due to, *inter alia*, logistic and financial difficulties.

SI failed to permeate other international gatherings for several reasons. I mentioned the consecutive interpreters' hostile reaction to a method that would relegate them to the anonymity of a booth. A second reason was that faith in international peaceful dialogue, still fresh in the 1920s, was shattered by such major events as the

1929 crisis and the withdrawal of Hitler's Germany from the League. In the 1930s international organizations began to lose their relevance, hardly a conducive atmosphere for experimentation or technical innovation in the field of multilateralism.

All these precedents show that, as I claim, the Nuremberg Trial marked not so much the birth of SI as its *coming of age*. Francesca Gaiba (1998) has studied the use of the system at Nuremberg in great detail. I will limit myself here to the following points: 1) Nuremberg interpreters were selected under extreme time pressure by people who had not practiced SI and whose criteria were, to say the least, very vague. 2) There was very little time, or no time at all, to train the selected candidates, who were often catapulted directly to the booths.[6] 3) The Nuremberg Trial played, therefore, the role of an on-the-job training center for simultaneous interpreters. 4) Even after that training, very few of the Nuremberg interpreters continued in the profession after the Trial. 5) Nuremberg proved that SI was technically feasible, time-saving and cost-effective.

I will now deal briefly with the battle between consecutive and simultaneous in the UN with the latter emerging victorious. The interpreters who worked at the San Francisco Conference, which gave birth to the United Nations, were the veteran consecutive interpreters from the League and their peers from the free-lance market. According to the new Organization’s rules, English and French would be the working languages, and these two plus Chinese, Russian and Spanish would be the official languages. Even before the *use* of these five languages was accepted on an equal basis in the deliberations, delegates could *speak* any of them and the Secretariat was expected to provide interpretation into English and French.

An example will help to understand why CI became increasingly ineffective at the UN. The year 1946 marked the beginning of the iron-curtain and cold-war ideological constructs, explaining why many of the statements, particularly in the Security Council,

were in Russian. The fact that those interventions had to be translated consecutively into both working languages, English and French, meant that a one-hour speech in Russian, nothing unusual in those days, took an entire three-hour meeting only to be interpreted, and another meeting to be reacted to.

Nuremberg was available as source of inspiration and the UN General Assembly decided to try its simultaneous method during the 1946 fall session, despite the opposition of the consecutive interpreters, who monopolized the interpretation service at the time.

The arguments of the consecutive team were, essentially, that SI would produce a parrot-like, ineffective translation, requiring the use of *alien* devices such as headphones, and depriving the delegates of the *time to think* that the CI setting allowed -an argument never used in monolingual settings or in multilingual conferences once SI was finally adopted. Other hidden causes of their hostile attitude may have been: the automatic reaction against technological innovation, which dates back at least to the *luddites*; the fear of losing their monopoly -and eventually perhaps their jobs-; and their feeling that working in a booth instead of from the podium meant a loss of status.

The arguments used by the pro-simultaneous were simply that SI allowed: a) a more authentic debate; b) the use, both active and passive, of all five official languages; and, above all, c) huge savings in time and money.

The SI test at the UN took place in November 1946 in the Fifth Committee, under the supervision of Colonel Dostert, transferred for this purpose from Nuremberg, and of his assistant Mark Priceman.[7] The experiment was successful and a full-dress version was repeated in the 1947 General Assembly. The Assembly then decided that SI should be progressively adopted as the interpreting method in all the meetings, with a few exceptions, such as the Security Council.

As at Nuremberg, interpreters' selection and training was done under time pressure. Dostert took with him from Nuremberg to New York three simultaneous interpreters for the test, and two more would join later. But the simultaneous teams were made up mostly of novices, who were placed in the booths with very little training. *Being able to listen in one language and speak simultaneously in the other* was sometimes the only criterion of the candidates' ability, thus reinforcing the legend that only the gifted few were up to the task.

The initial hostility of the consecutive interpreters towards their simultaneous colleagues was soon overcome, when both teams were administratively unified, as early as 1947. Most consecutive interpreters adapted to simultaneous and their original arguments against it quickly lost their apparent validity.

3. **Remote interpretation: the future**

What follows is an impressionistic reflection on what, in my view, can be considered as the second revolution in conference interpreting since its inception, but I am aware of the difficulties entailed in referring to developments still in the making.

The first attempts at SI in the 1920s -before the better organised 1928 trial- could be strictly considered as *remote interpretation*,[8] because interpreters followed the speech only through telephone lines from a room adjacent to the actual meeting room. According to Simone Signoret, her father, André Kaminker, translated *live* for the French radio network Hitler's first resounding speech in Nuremberg in 1934, presumably while listening in Paris to a radio station in Germany (Signoret: 15). Paradoxically, A. Kaminker would become one of the opponents of the simultaneous

modality and the probable coiner of the derogatory expression *téléphonistes* for the first team of simultaneous interpreters at the UN. Pseudo-remote interpretation was the method used by Paul Schmidt in translating Hitler's speech at the *Reichstag* in 1940 (Schmidt: 461-462).

Technical improvements were made from the 1940s onwards, and in the 1970s the first satellite experiments took place.[9] Since then, communications technology has evolved in a revolutionary manner, and we have probably seen just the tip of the iceberg. What seems to be the issue in the present circumstances is striking a balance between cost-effectiveness and quality of interpretation.

Remote conference interpreting requires a much higher quality of sound and vision than that needed for a monolingual setting, as some recent experiments have shown (Bros-Brann). State-of-the-art equipment is expensive and perhaps prices are not competitive yet with the old system of sending the interpreter to the place where the conference is taking place, but we know all too well what happens with technological innovations. Soon, price will not be the main problem.

Other difficulties have been pointed out, such as the psychological aspect of the added stress felt by interpreters in those, so far, strange circumstances. The conference format may also be a problem: a formal speech would lend itself better to remote interpretation than a parliamentary assembly meeting with rounds of brief and heated interventions (Mouzourakis: 37). Other disadvantages enumerated in a recent issue of the *AIIC Bulletin* are:

> [….] the message is stripped of its non-verbal content; the other participant's verbal and non-verbal reactions to the speaker and among themselves are not perceived; the screens glitter; there is no way of

assessing how the interpreted message has been received; there is a sense of alienation; and there is no daylight).[10]

Surely, some of these disadvantages are by no means exclusive to this mode. Others, such as the *sense of alienation*, remind one of similar arguments by consecutive interpreters when simultaneous was being introduced.

Indeed, the adoption of remote conference interpreting -and, incidentally, of other new technologies too- will still require certain technological adjustments. However, adjustments will also have to be made in the mindset and skills of interpreters, that is, their attitudes and their training, in order to adapt them to the new working conditions.[11]

Those who argue that the remote mode impairs interpretation quality should bear in mind that working conditions and results are often far from ideal even with the well-established system of *in situ* simultaneous, and noone -conference organisers, users or interpreters- seems to question the mode itself.

We learn from history that: a) a new paradigm takes time to replace the previous one, especially because mentalities are disinclined to change; and b) once the old paradigm has been replaced, its supposed advantages over the new one are rarely mentioned. This is what happened when simultaneous replaced consecutive in international conferences. The step represented the unprecedented triumph of technique over time in the long history of interpretation. Remote interpretation symbolises the triumph of technology over space, the attainment of de-localisation, the realisation of *U-topia* in its literal sense of *no-place*.

The new technologies, far from being seen as a threat, should perhaps be welcomed with an open mind as a challenge and as part of a natural process of evolution. Changes should perhaps be seen not only as obstacles but also as an avenue for new opportunities: on-line access to dictionaries, glossaries and the media; the

development of conference facilities in new places; even, who knows, the possibility of interpreting from one's personal working station at home! Interpreters, who throughout history have been able to operate in different languages and cultures remaining faithful to more than one fatherland, would also be in a good position to adapt to this new *placeless* technological environment.

Summary

Some major landmarks in conference interpretation history, highlighted in the paper, can be summarised as follows:

1) Consecutive conference interpreting began in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.

2) SI experiments started, and had a measure of success, in the second half of the 1920s.

3) SI came of age in the Nuremberg Trials and soon triumphed over consecutive, through a less than smooth process, at the United Nations Headquarters.

4) The second *revolution* in conference interpreting in the 20th century, namely the introduction of new technologies that will allow remote interpretation, is still going on.

In the same way that consecutive interpreters distrusted simultaneous at first and adapted to it later, we may expect that the current generation of interpreters will adapt to the new communications technologies, including remote interpretation, in the years to come.

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Endnotes

1. *Letter* from Edward Filene to Eric Drummond, dated in Boston on April 2, 1925. File no. 0 304/1/1, ILO Archives, Geneva.

2. *Report* "Electric Interpreters and reporters at international conferences", 23/4 [April 1928], illegible initials. File O 304/1/0, ILO Archives, Geneva.

3. *Report* dated 8.6.28, no signature. File O 304/1/0, ILO Archives, Geneva.

4. Olivia Rossetti-Agresti, a member of the illustrious Anglo-Italian family Rossetti -in which Dante Gabriele Rossetti stands out as poet and painter-, was one of the few female interpreters in the 1920s and 1930s (Madariaga:107).

5. *Report* from Fleury to Sanders "Telephonic interpretation. Recruiting of interpreters", 22 December 1927. In "Filene Experiment", file 0/304/1/0, ILO Archives, Geneva.

6. That was the case with Elisabeth Heyward, French-booth interpreter in Nuremberg, according to her oral testimony in several 1997 interviews with this paper's author.

7. Mark Priceman has related the far from smooth process in his 1997 interviews with this paper's author.

8. I use the expression *remote interpretation* as *simultaneous interpretation where the interpreter is not in the same room as the speaker or his/her audience* (Mouzourakis: 23)

9. In 1976 a satellite-linked UNESCO teleconference was tested between Paris and Nairobi (Bernstein, Thiéry). In 1978 an experiment of the same kind was tested between New York and Buenos Aires (Klebnikov).

10. Code for the use of new technologies in conference interpretation, *AIIC Bulletin* (1998). 26/2: 23.

11. AIIC and other interpreters' associations have adopted a common set of principles and standards to guide the use of new technologies. See Code for the use of new technologies in conference interpretation, in *AIIC Bulletin* (1998). 26/2: 23-25.