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INTERPRETERS AS DIPLOMATS

A DIPLOMATIC HISTORY OF THE ROLE OF INTERPRETERS IN WORLD POLITICS

INTRODUCTION

No matter who we are or where we live, we are all, thanks to translation and interpretation, contemporaries of every historical period and citizens of every country. The author of this work enables us to discover a collection of fascinating characters who, although they worked in the shadows of some of the world's great figures (but also the not so great), played an essential role in political and diplomatic affairs. Like the translators and interpreters who come back to life in these pages, she takes us beyond our linguistic and cultural boundaries and even beyond the boundaries erected through prejudice and ignorance.

Ruth A. Roland's story is embellished with numerous anecdotes, which give a human, realistic dimension to her characters. The interpreters belong to almost all of the subgroups of this age-old profession, from the Pharaohs' first interpreters to conference interpreters, with military, judicial, parliamentary and interpreting brokers in between. Canada's French explorer Jacques Cartier finished his seafaring career as an interpreting broker in the port of Saint-Malo in Brittany. Still today, interpreting brokers in ocean ports are the only ones apart from ship commanders who have the right to translate documents written in foreign languages before commercial courts. They are also the only ones to serve as go-betweens with foreigners.

One of the major strengths of *Interpreters as Diplomats* is that it is the only work to give an overview of other works by interpreters from antiquity to the introduction of a new interpretation method, simultaneous interpretation, by means of modern technology. Greeted with skepticism and even latent hostility by the mandarins of consecutive interpretation, simultaneous interpretation proved to be perfectly suited to the fast pace of modern life, the abolition of distances and the increasing number of international forums. The 20th century has been the age of rapprochement among nations. The global village would not have been conceived of without the cohort of translators and interpreters who give a voice to the main players on the international scene.

The invisible men and women wearing headphones, sitting in a dimly lit booth the size of a confessional and who look like they are talking to their microphone, actively participate in turbulent peace talks, in war crime trials, in somewhat calmer trade negotiations and in all kinds of international meetings of experts. Their presence is also required at important gatherings of diplomats endeavoring to settle international disputes. In their own way, modern interpreters contribute to world harmony.

The brief historical overview presented to us in Roland's book clearly shows that language has always been more than a simple communication tool: it has also been a mark of national prestige, and interpreters have brought this prestige to the international arena.

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As everyone knows, language is also a tricky, difficult tool to handle. People can get offended if breakdowns in communication, often unforeseeable, occur. Experienced interpreters know this. Instinctively they put up their guard when tension is in the air, discussions are lively and passions are unleashed. A harmless phrase can provoke a diplomatic incident. "*Il y a anguille sous roche*," a Soviet delegate once said in a speech at the time of the Cold War. With no malice aforethought, the interpreter translated this expression by "There is a nigger in the woodpile." A black man got up immediately and left the room. He was the leader of the American delegation: he thought the Russian was insulting him. If the interpreter had said "There is more than meets the eye" instead, which means the same as "There is a nigger in the woodpile," he would not have offended the sensitive American delegate and would have avoided an international incident. Interpreters are linguistic acrobats constantly walking on a tightrope.

The interpreter is as much Dr. Jekyll as Mr. Hyde. One day he may have to put himself in the shoes of a Russian foreign minister; the next, in those of a famous surgeon from New York, an oil tycoon from Riyadh, a top-ranking army commander from Brussels or a banker from Geneva. A good interpreter does not settle for a mechanical rendering of the spoken word. Before him stands a living being, sometimes placid, at other times raging with anger, indignation or impatience. The intensity of such feelings, which become one with word meaning, needs to be rendered to a certain degree by the interpreter. However, there are certain risks in doing so, as an American interpreter learned the hard way. At a time when tension between the United States and the USSR was at its highest, he was accused of being a "card-carrying communist" for having enthusiastically interpreted in front of television cameras a virulent condemnation of the West by the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations. Our perception of the interpreter is not entirely independent of the person to whom he lends his voice.

Dr. Roland's well-documented history takes us not only to the West and the Middle East but also—and this is yet another aspect of the originality of this piece—to little explored areas in the general history of translation and interpretation such as China, Japan, India, the former USSR and the United States. The fact that the author is a specialist in political science, and is very familiar with the situation in Southeast Asia, no doubt explains why her book focusses on these countries. It is a mine of new information on the social class of certain groups of interpreters, their working conditions, the esteem in which they were held or, at the other end of the spectrum, people's mistrust of them. We also learn that many interpreters met a tragic end, and that others were punished for their

incompetence or dishonesty (fig. 2).

The first Macedonian interpreters were principally recruited from the nobility. Slaves, emancipated or not, could be interpreters too. Was this a sign of democratization of the profession? In the 16th century, interpreters were also recruited among barbers, alchemists and merchants. Many an interpreter in antiquity was beheaded by a capricious king or a prince who confused "messenger" with "message." But by the early years of the 20th century, interpreters who worked for the League of Nations enjoyed diplomatic privileges, including diplomatic immunity. Conditions had definitely changed for the better.

Interpreters as Diplomats provides proof that high-level, experienced interpreters exert a certain power in the practising of their profession. With judicious intervention, they can help naive, ignorant clients avoid otherwise costly blunders. Although their skills are linguistic and their principal function is to facilitate communication, interpreters are far more than simple relayers of speech.

This power stems from the considerable credibility enjoyed by the competent, reputable, neutral and impartial interpreter. The best example of the enormous trust that can be placed in a translator or interpreter is the remarkable case of the German Friedrich von Gentz (fig. 3). An observation of his on translators of diplomatic documents is quoted and explained in Dr. Roland's text. At the peak of his power, Gentz, brain of the Holy Alliance, combined the offices of Metternich's secretary, Secretary-General of the Vienna Congress, agent of a number of foreign powers and very much sought-after interpreter and translator of diplomatic documents. In February 1801, he noted: "Lord Carysfoot entrusted me with the translation into French of the publication of the English note against Prussia on the one hand, and shortly afterwards Graf Haugwitz with that into German of the Prussian note against England." This is indeed a great testimony of trust.

Interpreters as Diplomats is a reproduction of a 1982 work entitled *Translating World Affairs* (Jefferson, N.C., McFarland & Company). As director of the Perspectives on Translation series, I concluded that republishing this study in a revised, up-to-date edition would be useful. The original work went practically unnoticed in translation and interpretation circles. To my knowledge, neither newsletters from professional associations nor translation reviews discussed it. This book has been unduly omitted in the references of most of the specialized works on the subject. Yet, this well-documented piece of research—proven by the extensive bibliography—is the only book-length study that paints a truly comprehensive history of interpretation, which was practised even before the birth of translation and writing. It was thus necessary to make this contribution to the history of

interpretation known to translators, interpreters and historians, particularly since this book can be considered as the follow-up to the collective work *Translators through History* (1995), which focussed on the history of translation and which I also co-directed. Incidentally, the last chapter of this book, a UNESCO and John Benjamins[1] co-publication, is devoted entirely to interpreters and is entitled "Interpreters and the Making of History."

The unique angle used to approach the subject—the role of interpreters in diplomatic and political history—doubly justifies the publication of a new edition of Roland's book. A curious reader, a professional interpreter or an interpretation student wishing to learn about the history of the profession will find in it the main historical events in which interpreters distinguished themselves. Many periods are covered, including the Greco-Roman period, the conquistadors (Cortés and his native interpreter Doña Marina), the discovery of the New World (Samuel de Champlain's residents-interpreters in New France) and even Colbert's institute for the *Jeunes de langue* or *Enfants de langue*, established in 1669 to train young children as interpreters for work in the Levant. The book also deals with interpreters who were instrumental in the signing of important international treaties, who worked in the interpretation services of the Chinese, Indian or Japanese bureaucracies, and the League of Nations, and others who played a key role during both world wars, the Nuremberg trials and the United Nations assemblies. Readers can become familiar with the great names in the profession—founders of a new style of interpretation, such as Léon Dostert (fig. 7) or exceptionally talented practitioners, such as Ernest Satow, Paul Mantoux (fig. 5), André Kaminker, Arthur H. Birse (fig. 8), Eugen Dollmann (fig. 9) and Vernon Walters.

By pulling together a mass of scattered documents about interpreters and publishing her work, Ruth A. Roland has made an invaluable contribution. We hope to match this by giving her book a new lease on life and by helping it to get the readership and recognition it deserves.

Note

1. Also available are a French edition, *Les Traducteurs dans l'histoire* (Paris/Ottawa, Les Éditions UNESCO/Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1995), and a Portuguese edition, *Os traductores na história* (São Paulo, Editora Ática, 1998). A translation into German is being prepared by a team of translators working under the supervision of Hannelore Lee-Jahnke (University of Geneva). This version is due to be published in 2000.

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Source : Ruth A. Roland, *Interpreters as Diplomats*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1999, p. 1-6