

THE TRAINING OF CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS

Blake T. HANNA, Montreal

Studies and theses concerning interpreting and translating are extremely difficult to find in English. Over the period of the last ten years, a great deal of work has been done in this field, but most of it has been done outside the English-speaking countries. It was with a great deal of pleasure, therefore, that we welcomed a thesis submitted by Miss Eva Paneth for the degree of Master of Arts in Education at London University, and dealing with the problem of conference interpreting.¹

Miss Paneth surveys the field of conference interpreting with a critical eye, discussing the history and development of consecutive as well as simultaneous techniques, treating the various problems they have given rise to, and offering a number of pertinent suggestions concerning the teaching methods involved. It is the latter point I wish to cover in this issue, for the problem of the teaching of interpretation is indeed an important one to those whose native language is English. An examination of the following list, given in Miss Paneth's thesis, shows why:

"In roughly chronological order of their foundation there are interpreters' schools in:

- a) Paris - *Ecole Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes* (f. 1795).
- b) Heidelberg - attached to the University (f. 1930).
- c) Geneva - part of the University (f. 1940).
- d) Gemersheim - part of Mainz University (f. 1946).
- e) Paris - *Ecole d'Interprètes organisée à l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales* (f. 1948).
- g) Georgetown - *The Institute of Language and Linguistics* (Washington, D.C.), part of the Foreign Service School of the university (f. 1949).
- h) Montreal - *Section de Linguistique*, Interpreters' and Translators' School (courses since 1949).
- i) Pittsburgh - Pennsylvania.

¹ Paneth, Eva, *An Investigation into Conference Interpreting (With Special Reference to the Training of Interpreters)*. Thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education, London University, April 1957, 160 p. Cf. review p. 00

- j) Munich - (A private school run by Dr. Paul Schmidt, Hitler's Interpreter) (f. 1952).
- k) Vienna - Arising from the old *Konsular-Akademie* (f. 1952).
- l) Paris - *Ecole d'Interprètes* in the building of the Sorbonne (f. 1955).

Such schools in English-speaking countries are therefore in the minority.' If Miss Paneth's list is complete, and she does point out that there are certainly schools of this sort in the Soviet Union of which little is known, there is a fertile field for improvement in the teaching of translation and conference interpreting in English-speaking countries. In fact, the aim of Miss Paneth's thesis is to investigate the practicality of establishing such a school in England, where none exists at the present time. Her investigation of the question of training conference interpreters is based on her observation of techniques employed in some of the abovementioned schools.

Miss Paneth proposes to start with previously-trained translators as raw material. Such translators have a head start on non-translators. Being already familiar with written translation, they can use their previous experience as a foundation for their training in interpretation. It must be pointed out, however, that the trained translator comes equipped with a built-in drawback. He has a tendency to polish his work beyond the limits imposed by the time at the conference interpreter's disposal. The first step, then, is to counteract the translator's tendency to go back and improve upon his interpretation. Unlike a written first draft, the interpretation, once said, cannot be unsaid.

As far as candidates for interpreters' posts are concerned, extroverts seem to make a better showing than do introverts. This may be explained by the inherent need to show off in public that seems to be a pre-requisite of interpreting. The mortality rate is high among interpreting candidates. The Gernersheim Institute in Germany turns out roughly 20 interpreters for every 100 candidates. The candidate must have achieved a certain degree of fluency in the languages involved. Previous translating experience, as mentioned above, is of great importance. In addition, the candidate must possess steady nerves and the ability to work under pressure. The candidate who jumps when a door slams or loses his head under pressure is not cut out for work of this type.

At first, Miss Paneth proposes placing trainees in earphone-equipped auditoriums used for simultaneous interpretation. Taking their places, much as would the delegates to a conference, they listen to speeches given over the earphones and practice whispering their interpretations to themselves. Since everyone else is wearing earphones, no one is bothered. Indeed, occasional eaves-dropping would afford the weaker student an opportunity to be "swept back into the current of speech, if their own had run dry." Microphones are not used as yet, since the trainees are still in the practice stage. And Miss Paneth intends that they practice. "For training purposes, it is desirable to provide long and frequent periods of practice for as many people as possible," she declares, advocating three-hour practice sessions as often as possible.

For practice purposes, a library of actual conference speeches should be assembled by the instructor. The speeches should be graded accord-

ing to difficulty, and the instructor should be familiar with them. My own experience has been that this statement might well be qualified. In general, the interpreter runs up against three broad categories of material to be translated: speeches, readings and discussions. They present increasing difficulty in the order mentioned. The term "speech" may be applied to whatever a trained public speaker might say upon a speaker's platform, before a large audience, whether using brief notes as a reminder or not. His rate of delivery is slow, his enunciation distinct, and he has a tendency to outline his remarks in advance, and to summarize them afterward, in order to assure himself that his audience has understood. His vocabulary and style would not be confused with that of a written text. It is my own firm conviction that public speakers should resist the temptation to speak in public under any circumstances other than those mentioned above, but since such is not the case, interpreters must be trained to handle material chosen from the second, and far more common, category. A read text is stylistically indistinguishable from a piece of writing meant to be read to oneself. It becomes a speech only incidentally, when read aloud to a large audience. The rate of delivery is inevitably faster, the sentences longer and more flowery, and the thought consequently more difficult to seize. There is usually less summarizing and outlining. Charles Laughton and the late Dylan Thomas have done notable work in the field of the dramatic reading. Most conference speakers, fearing an embarrassing lapse of memory in public, are led to adopt it as a substitute for the speech. The fact that if the speaker is unable to remember what he plans to say, there is little likelihood of the audience remembering it either has little bearing on the matter; material of this type is by far the most prevalent of all, and the interpreter must be equipped to handle it.

The discussion, being totally unprepared, is undoubtedly the most difficult of the three types of material I have mentioned. The confusion of voices involved, the employment of colloquial ellipses and the lack of time for the participants to organize their thoughts beforehand, greatly complicate the interpreter's task. It is undoubtedly in translating this type of material that the interpreter makes the largest number of mistakes.

It is to be noticed that the addition of a technical vocabulary may be made to any of the three types of material. It is a question to be studied separately. I have found that, the most successful technique for teaching simultaneous interpretation is to initiate the candidate to a series of non-technical speeches, in order to allow time for acquiring a certain degree of skill in interpreting. Later on, material in the two other categories can be added, graded as to difficulty through increased speed and the introduction of technical vocabulary.

In training simultaneous interpreters, it is important not to overlook the fact that the listener does not have access to the original speech. He feels cheated if he hears the speaker talking while the interpreter is not, but beyond this measure of comparison he is not equipped to advance. In general, he judges the result solely on the output of the interpreter, a fact which must be borne in mind in training such things as the candidate's voice, delivery and style. On the translating level, this means training the candidate out of certain literal translations that

betray in an awkward manner, the origin of the text being interpreted. Such expressions as "Mr. President" and "the order of the day" are translating possibilities in English, but the candidate must be trained to discard them in the heat of interpretation in favor of "Mr. Chairman," and "the agenda".

The trainee's voice is frequently a shock to him the first time he hears it recorded. Practice, and especially recording and listening to it himself, will produce a clear, strong voice, suitably pitched and pleasant to the ear. Usually, the candidate's voice will have to lower in pitch. Initial nervousness and tension tend to raise the pitch of the voice to a level where it will grate on the ears of the listener. With practice, and when the candidate becomes less nervous, his pitch will drop somewhat of itself. The best way to get rid of the habit of saying "uh" after every third word is to station another trainee beside the offender with instructions to poke him in the ribs every time he does it, until he becomes annoyed enough to stop. Listening to recordings of his own voice have somewhat the same effect.

Finally, the question of delivery can be taken care of through the use of recordings. As I have already mentioned, long pauses during which the speaker continues to talk lay the interpreter open to a possibly unfounded charge of incompetence. The candidate must learn to arrange his delivery in such a manner that the listener hears him speaking whenever the speaker is. One of the most consistent difficulties is the tendency to draw out the first few words of each group until the interpreter seizes the thought, then to rush through the rest in order to finish up in time. This can fall into a pattern quite as annoying as the habit of laughing at a joke before translating it. The cheapest way to improve the interpreter's style, suggests Miss Paneth, is to work on the same text several times in succession.

In placing candidates in the interpreting program, Miss Paneth advocates administering a translating test, gauged to ascertain his proficiency in the second language, followed by an interpreting test, designed to bring out his aptitudes, as well as his attitude towards the question of interpreting. The trainee should be admitted to the second test only upon successful completion of the first. The test should be administered in public by someone outside the teaching staff of the school in question.

A close integration of the entire course of study would be helpful. Discussions of other subjects should be interpreted, exercises in précis writing should be done, and there should be close cooperation between members of the teaching staff. At the University of Geneva, 12 one-hour courses each week in other faculties are required to give students the needed background in other subjects. The author points out that in this connection, courses in political science and economics are more valuable than courses in science. At Geneva, the problem of the sciences is handled in an extremely effective manner. Rather than trying to give interpreters the needed background in the sciences, the school gives interpreting training to students of other faculties, such as medicine. Equipping a medical student with training as an interpreter has proven less dangerous than equipping an interpreting candidate with a cursory

knowledge of medicine. Whatever may be the manner of producing the broad, general knowledge desired, it is an unquestionable requirement of the interpreter, and mistakes in interpreting are continually cropping up for lack of it. In comparing the training offered by different schools, Miss Paneth reports that Geneva requires twenty hours of courses per week, while Georgetown requires only eleven. The latter figure must not be taken a criticism, however, since she feels that a great deal of time should be devoted to private practice. There is always the danger in this field of being diverted into giving something akin to a course in the theory of bicycle riding.

Miss Paneth condemns the practice of permitting exchanges between the instructor delivering a speech for interpreting purposes and the student who is interpreting it. She points out that such conditions may well prove fatal to the aims of the training program. Any arrangement permitting the instructor immediate access to a translation while delivering the speech should be avoided as unrealistic. Furthermore, the student needs time to warm up to his subject, and must not be interrupted while in the midst of a thought-train. Interpreting practice and the criticism of the result should be rigorously divorced. Insofar as the delivery of the material for interpretation is concerned, Heidelberg has developed a system of offering twenty scholarships for any faculty to foreign students, on condition that they deliver speeches in their mother tongues for interpreting purposes two periods each week. Such a system gives the candidate access to a wide variety of authentic pronunciations, as well as a number of different techniques of delivery.

Additional practice may be obtained by the reading aloud of a text in a language other than that in which it was printed. Such an exercise is instrumental in teaching the student to seize the over-all thought of the text in hand, a concept which Miss Paneth calls by its German name, "Gestalt". This concept is as important to simultaneous interpreting as it is to consecutive for, contrary to popular belief, the simultaneous interpreter must do something more than parrot back the words of the speaker in another language. Experiments have demonstrated that the student who is unable to seize the over-all thought of a sentence at first glance is rarely able to attain a speed greater than 110 words per minute in actual simultaneous interpreting. In contrast, the author points out that a normal, well-delivered speech in French is given at the rate of 160 words per minute. Exercises in précis writing are helpful at this stage, since the art of reading a text and then boiling it down to its simplest form of expression is instrumental to the acquisition of the over-all concept so necessary to simultaneous and consecutive interpretation.

In this connection, Miss Paneth suggests that courses be given in the art of concentrating. Memory can be improved with practice, and she wonders if the powers of concentration, so important to the interpreter, might not be improved in a like manner.

At the end of his course of training, the student should not be checked out of the school until he has had a supervised practice period much like the internship of a doctor. These probationary periods might well begin by a period of mute assistance, during which the probationer

watches the interpreter work. He might help in the documentation, get lists of names, root out pertinent documents and get them ready, and learn how to cope with the unexpected. Later on, he might work a short spell from time to time under the tutelage of the professional.

His final examination, after this period of apprenticeship, should be conducted once again by someone outside the teaching staff of the school. She condemns the practice of using the same person as speaker and examiner in interpreting examinations. An instructor might well serve as speaker, although it must be pointed out that this presents the interpreter with a familiar voice, a rare advantage under authentic field conditions.

In the conclusion of her study, Miss Paneth makes a number of suggestions to conference organizers. She points out that "good documentation will help the interpreter to do full justice to your text. Any factual information, notes for the speech, definitions of special terminology you can give him beforehand, will enhance the effectiveness of the translation." To this end, she recommends that conference organizers adopt the habit of according interpreters a paid study day immediately prior to each conference.

The necessity of good transmission is stressed. If the equipment functions improperly, if the volume is too low, or if the speaker turns his back, or fails to use a microphone, interpretation becomes impossible. Worse yet, a remark missed by the interpreter may hamper his comprehension of the over-all thought involved.

Miss Paneth likewise points out the necessity of stressing the importance of slowing down speakers who talk too fast. My own observation is that this can rarely be done, once the speaker is fairly launched into his speech before an audience of several hundred people. The interpreter would be well advised to concentrate on seizing the over-all picture, in order to render the speech in slightly abridged form, a technique which slightly overlaps the field of the consecutive interpreter.

She likewise points out that votes are frequently taken too rapidly for the simultaneous interpretation to keep up with them. Any convention delegate will bear witness to the fact that many chairmen will rattle off, "All those in favor opposed carried!" not only without pausing for the interpretation, but frequently without pausing to count the number of hands raised. The unfortunate result of this practice is that delegates frequently end up by voting in favor of something they are against.

