

Simultaneous Interpretation in ICAO

"Mr. Chairman . . ."

"Monsieur le Président . . ."

"Señor Presidente . . ."

Serving the most modern and speedy form of transportation, ICAO utilizes the most modern and speedy means of reciprocal translation; simultaneous interpretation. As many as 36,000 words are verbally translated in one three-hour session of the ICAO Council, when that body meets for debate. Since the essence of any international organization is international cooperation through understanding, simultaneous interpretation has been found invaluable as the means by which the language barriers to the effective participation of a number of representatives in debates have been broken down. At the second meeting of its First Session, 5 June 1947, the ICAO Council unanimously decided to authorize the purchase of the simultaneous interpretation equipment which had recently been installed in the Council Chamber. At the same time, the Council decided that its meetings would be conducted in English, French and Spanish. The system had only then been in use in ICAO for a trial period of two months, under a loan arrangement concluded with the United Nations by the ICAO Secretariat. This method of interpretation, however, is not a recent innovation.

From the days of the middle thirties when the system modestly made its debut in the debates of the International Labour Organization, its story has been one of steady advance, despite objections and misgivings. The "Filene Finlay Translator", as it was then known, rendered incalculable service at the Nuremberg Trials at the conclusion of which Justice Jackson, Chief Prosecuting Counsel, declared "without the use of simultaneous interpretation, the Nuremberg trials would have lasted many years — may even have been impossible." The United Nations Organization installed the system shortly after coming into being, and the National Council of Switzerland, the Belgian Senate and the Belgian House of Representatives all employ simultaneous interpretation.

Special mention is also made of this method of interpretation in Article 15 of the International Telecommunication Convention which states "in conferences and at the meetings of the permanent organs of the Union, the debates shall be conducted with the aid of an efficient system of recip-

rocal translation from and into English, French and Spanish." Three years' experience in ICAO have confirmed that the development and introduction of this system have made a considerable contribution to the machinery of international consultation and understanding.

Readers of the *Bulletin* who have used this system may be interested in a brief account of its operation. Furthermore, the time is not inappropriate to record the results of the three years' experience that has thus been gained.

The Equipment

Three conference rooms are wired for simultaneous interpretation in ICAO, equipped with microphones, head-sets, interpreting booths, control rooms and recording apparatus. The main Council Chamber is wired to accommodate 57 participating speakers and 155 listeners; a second Council Chamber seats 31 speakers and 80 listeners; another Committee Room may cater for 30 speakers and 75 listeners. In order that this system of interpretation should not be handicapped by immobility, movable units are used at meetings held away from the Organization Headquarters. At the last (Fourth) Session of the Assembly, the first two Plenary Sessions were held in the Sun Life Building, a few hundred yards from the Aviation Building, at which portable booths and equipment were used with little inconvenience and without impairing efficiency. The number of head-sets provided was adequate to accommodate no less than 600 listeners.

Technically, the equipment is a highly complex system of wiring, requiring skilful installation and expert maintenance. Built generally to individual specifications, it involves the detailed planning of circuits — highly specialized work. In the case of ICAO three months were required to install the interpretation equipment in the main Council Chamber after careful planning. The layout plan of the simultaneous interpretation system in the Main Council Chamber is shown in *Figure 1*. During a meeting the blue tinted windows of the interpreting booths screen not only the interpreters themselves, but also a sound engineer who follows the proceedings and mani-

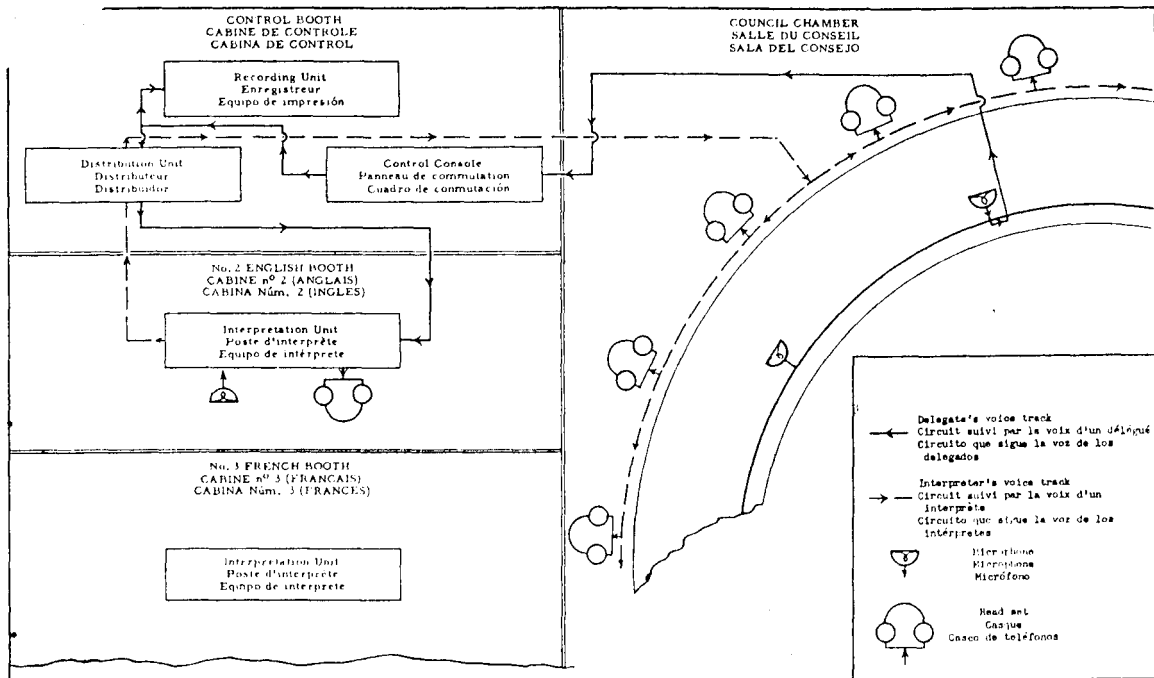


Fig 1. Diagram showing the voice tracks of delegates and interpreters.

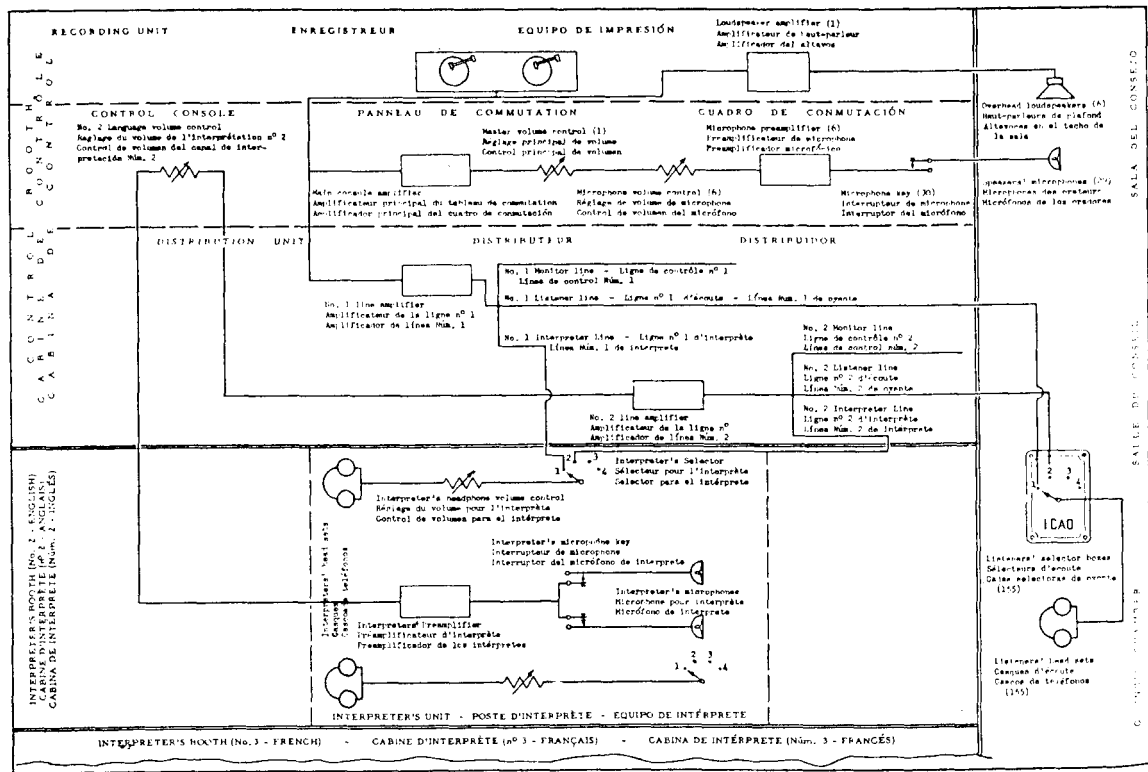
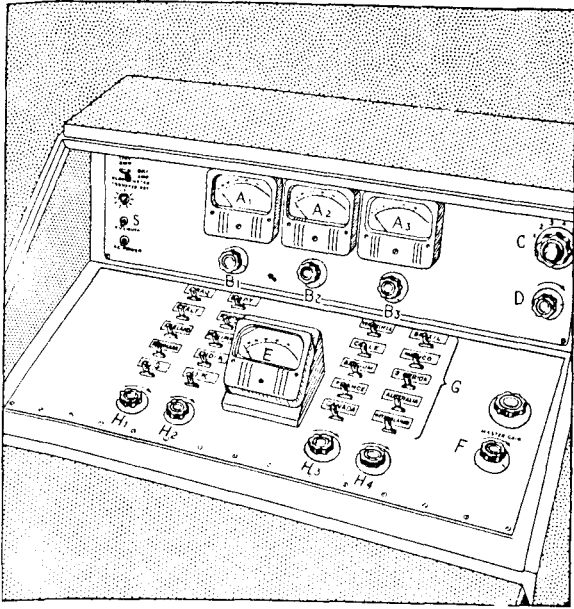
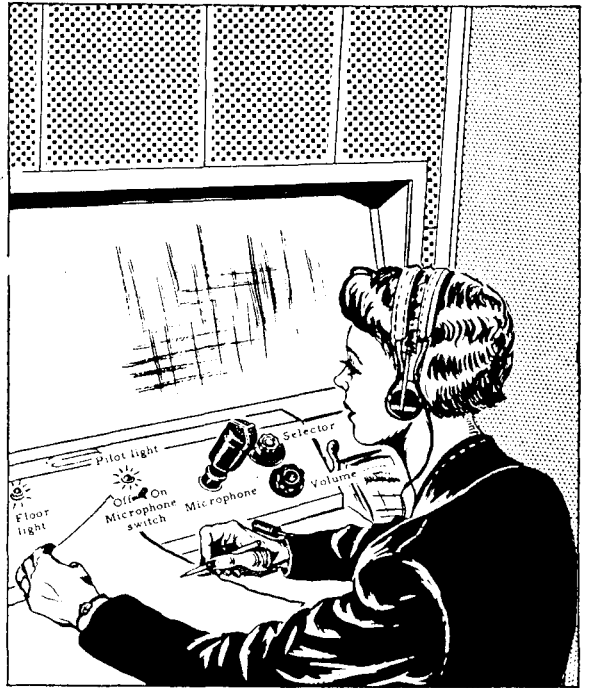


Fig 2. Block Diagram.
ICAO Simultaneous Interpretation System, 4 Channels—3 Languages.
(The numbers of units of various components in parentheses.)



Control Console

A. Language Volume Indicators; B. Language Volume Controls; C. Language Selector; D. Language Selector Volume Control; E. Speakers' Volume Indicator; F. Master Volume Control; G. Microphone Keys; H. Microphone Volume Controls; S. On-Off Switch.



Interior of Interpretation Booth.



Extensive use of simultaneous interpretation is made in conferences such as the one pictured above. (Note interpretation booths in background, left.)

pulates the equipment accordingly. Of the various microphones shown around the Council table, only that of the presiding officer is constantly "alive"; the other microphones are opened individually as each delegate begins to speak. When the presiding officer recognizes a delegate with the words "the Delegate of Country X", this is a signal to the engineer to open the appropriate microphone. In this way undue background noise is avoided on the audio channels. A listener need only turn the switch on his individual language selector to hear all the proceedings in the language of his choice: English on No. 2 Channel, French on No. 3 and Spanish on No. 4. On Channel No. 1 he may hear the actual voice of the speaker, whatever the language.

Although a rapid flow of words does not usually offer any difficulties to the experienced interpreter, he is provided, as a matter of principle, with the means of communicating to the gathering the fact that a speaker is talking too rapidly. Installed at the conference table, directly before the Chair, are two light bulbs, one blue and one red. These lights serve as a warning; the flashing blue light indicates "too fast" and the red one "speaker not talking into microphone."

Figure 2 shows the electrical and mechanical layout of the system as installed in the Main Council Chamber. The organization has not introduced the "wireless" system of interpretation, *i.e.*, the use of radiophonic transmission in place of the present telephonic method, as have some other international bodies. A study made by the sound engineering staff of ICAO has led to the conclusion that, in this sphere, radio has its limitations, notably including the high cost of purchase and maintenance of equipment — since each individual receiver frequently requires a new battery — the possibility of interference from other sources and the difficulty of frequency adjustments.

The Interpretation

The respective merits of the two forms of interpretation currently in use, "consecutive" and "simultaneous", have been the subject of considerable controversy. The older form of verbal translation, consecutive interpretation, is more exacting in that the whole translation follows at the end of the exposé. In an assessment of the qualities and drawbacks of each system, it would be well to point out in the particular case of ICAO that before simultaneous interpretation was introduced, English alone was spoken in the Council of the Provisional Organization. This circumstance tended to handicap the effective participation of a number of representatives in the debates. It is arguable that consecutive interpretation is preferable when only two languages are used; in the case of more than two languages, however, de-

bates are protracted to an extent which is sometimes felt to be intolerable for the expeditious conduct of business. Thus the new system has the advantage of saving time, together with some of the drawbacks inherent in most "time savers".

Experienced interpreters will point out one advantage of simultaneous interpretation that is frequently apt to be overlooked: it is the fact that a decided majority of the mistakes which occur in consecutive interpretation are traceable to a lapse of memory or a defect in the interpreter's personal system of note-taking. These limitations are largely overcome by simultaneous interpretation. The two systems may be compared, as far as the role of the interpreter is concerned, to the differences between radio and theatre acting: an interpreter does not require to be seen to be understood.

One outstanding fact must be borne in mind when comparing simultaneous interpretation with its older counterpart, and that is in the former less time is allowed for recapitulation, correction or apology. Should a consecutive interpreter find himself in difficulty at any time during his exposé, it is his privilege to turn to the speaker whose address he is interpreting and request the necessary information to complete his verbal translation.

Tangible evidence of the successful use of simultaneous interpretation is to be found in the fact that the Administrative Commission of the last session of the Assembly was under the chairmanship of Commodore A.R. Beni, of the Argentine, who spoke Spanish throughout. During the 1949 Assembly, that same Commission was headed by M.R. Lebeau, of Belgium, who used French alone. Thus the Organization maintains its international character from the point of view of language.

Although it has been claimed that consecutive interpretation possesses a distinct advantage over the simultaneous system in connection with legal or highly technical conferences, this has not been found so in ICAO. In all its fields, the Organization's business may be safely conducted by means of the simultaneous system.

There have been many references made to the amount of strain that the simultaneous method of interpretation places upon the interpreter. While ICAO teams have been known to interpret actively for more than ten hours in one day, a normal schedule should not exceed five hours a day, since rest and study periods are indispensable. The practice of alternating interpretation and translation duties has been most beneficial in many respects; the strains imposed by this dual duty being of a different nature, the change from one to the other familiarizes the interpreter with his documentation while interpretation gives the translator a better understanding of the conduct of meetings.

Lastly, the quality of interpretation under the simultaneous system is largely governed by the speaker's habits. If the speaker is clear and distinct, and proceeds at a moderate speed, *e.g.* about 150 words a minute, avoids overlong parentheses or unnecessary subtleties, and uses straightforward sentences, it may be said that the resulting interpretation will be as crisp, convincing and

faithful a rendering of the original as is possible under any system of improvised translation. Indeed, the rules for both the speaker and the interpreter under the simultaneous interpretation system, are much the same as the commonly accepted rules of rhetoric which make any public speaking clear and persuasive.



Mr. Carlos Delgado de Carvalho (standing) thanking the members of the ICAO Secretariat on behalf of the UNESCO Delegates. Seated are, left to right: Mr. H.W. Mandefield, Mr. L. Boussard (partially hidden), Mr. A.R. McComb, Deputy Secretary General, ICAO, and Mrs. de Carvalho.

UNESCO Visits the Secretariat

On Thursday 10 August the ICAO Secretariat in Montreal received a delegation of geographers attending the Seminar of the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) at MacDonal College, Sainte Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, led by Mr. Carlos Delgado de Carvalho. The visit to the Organization Headquarters was in reciprocation to the one made to the UNESCO Seminar by members of the ICAO Secretariat.

The delegates were welcomed on behalf of the Organization by Mr. A.R. McComb, Deputy Secretary General, who, in a short address, ex-

pressed not only his official, but also his personal interest in the UNESCO visit.

Before the introductory speech by Mr. McComb, those delegates who were not at home in the language in which they were being addressed were requested to make full use of the simultaneous interpretation facilities.

Mr. H.W. Mandefield, Acting Chief of the Language Section, spoke to the gathering referring briefly to the various functions of the Language Section, notably interpretation, translation and lexicography, and particularly simultaneous interpretation.