Evelyn Moggio-Ortiz

Multilingualism as a Path to Multilateralism

INTERPRETERS MEET HISTORY

"The interpreters are the true permanent Members of the Security Council."

These words, spoken by one ambassador when taking leave of the Security Council at the end of his country's mandate, illustrate the strong link between interpreters and their clients, as well as their degree of exposure in carrying out their work.

By definition, the work of an interpreter is essentially oral in nature. The words uttered by the interpreter are not cast in stone, as are the written words of our translator colleagues. It was precisely the oral nature of my profession that pushed me to tell with sound and images, and not to write, its history. I undertook the project of producing a film about the interpreters, as an essential part of the oral history of the United Nations, for its fiftieth anniversary. I had come to realize that little was known, in general, about the profession of conference interpreter. The film, *The Interpreters: A Historical Perspective*, was produced in the six official languages of the UN. Its purpose is to show how the profession of conference interpreter developed at the UN and to portray it accurately.

Although the need to communicate is as old as mankind and the mission of interpreting has always existed, the profession of interpreter is relatively new. This new role was defined in 1191 by Saladin, in a response to King Richard the Lionheart: “Kings meet only after the conclusion of an accord. In any event, I do not understand your language, and you are ignorant of mine, and we therefore need a translator (*turjuman*)[1] in whom we both have confidence. Let this man, then, act as a messenger between us. When we arrive at an understanding, we will meet, and friendship will prevail between us”.

New technologies

The profession of conference interpreter developed at the United Nations in parallel with the organization’s language policies, and the introduction of new technologies. These allowed for new modes of interpretation. Consecutive interpretation was the first mode of interpretation widely used at international meetings. By the end of the First World War, when the League of Nations was established, English had achieved parity with French as a diplomatic language. In consecutive interpretation, the interpreter takes notes on the speech being delivered and – only after the speaker has completed the speech – the interpreter renders the speech into another language. This is called consecutive interpretation because the interpreter waits for the speaker to finish, and then proceeds.

This was the mode used at the beginning at the United Nations. The pioneers of this method were Antoine Velleman, founder of the Geneva Interpreters School, Jean Herbert, André and Georges Kaminker, Major Le Bosquet, Georges Rabinovich, J. F. Rozan and Georges Thorgevsky, among others. Jean Herbert recruited the first team of interpreters for the First UN General Assembly, held in London in 1946. He had worked in “consecutive” in preparatory conferences for the Leagues of Nations and many statesmen and other leaders, including Clemenceau, Wilson, Lloyd George, Poincaré, Briand, Streseman, Barthou, Mussolini, Stettinius and Churchill. His team went on to work for the United Nations in New York, where he started the first training programme for interpreters and became head of the Interpretation Service. These interpreters were known as the “consecutivists”.

In the first “Rules of procedure concerning languages”[2], Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish were named as official UN languages, but only English and French were to be working languages. Speeches could be delivered in any of the five official languages, but were only interpreted in consecutive into English and French. This was time-consuming, as any speech given on the floor had to be interpreted consecutively into French or English or both, according to the language spoken, taking longer to interpret than the original. This is one reason why there were only two working languages at the start. In our film, Bob Burton, an interpreter colleague, tells us about an experience in consecutive:

“This was the first time I was interpreting [Soviet Foreign Minister] Andrei Gromyko from Russian into English. Gromyko had a rather fearsome reputation among interpreters, so I approached this task with fear and trembling. A ritual phrase came up in Gromyko’s statement: ‘reduction and regulation of armaments’, and the first time I had to repeat that, ... I said ‘reduction and regulation of arguments! ’. Gromyko apparently laughed and said ‘that would not be a bad idea’. When I finished my interpretation – this was of course in consecutive, I’d say it lasted about an hour or so – Gromyko, I remember, raised his pencil and said in Russian: ‘I want to call attention to a good interpretation!’. I gave a sigh of relief.”

Practical solution

However, a revolution was in the making: “simultaneous interpretation”. This would allow for a true expression of multilingualism and change the nature of international debates. This revolution started the same year as the United Nations, with the establishment of the Nuremberg war crime trials.[3]

Colonel Leon Dostert, General Eisenhower’s private interpreter, was called upon to find a practical solution to the language barrier, as the traditional consecutive interpretation in four languages – English, French, German and Russian – would have unreasonably lengthened the hearings. Simultaneous interpretation seemed to be the answer. It allowed speakers to be interpreted while they were speaking.

Col. Dostert decided to use the Filene-Finley IBM Hushaphone interpretation system of microphones for the interpreters. A set of earpieces for the delegates was developed in 1926 by Gordon Finley, an electrical engineer, and Mr. Filene, a delegate to the International Labor Conference. They had found that consecutive interpretation took too long. Their innovation was first used at the International Labour Conference in 1927.

By introducing this system of interpretation at the Nuremberg trials, Col. Dostert pioneered the mode of simultaneous interpretation in the international arena. It is said that simultaneous interpretation worked so well that Hermann Goering complained that it had cut his lifespan by three quarters. A small group of simultaneous interpreters, who had worked at Nuremberg, was brought in to work at Lake Success, N.Y., the provisional Headquarters of the UN. These included three of the best interpreters, George Klebnikov, Georges Vassiltchikov and Eugenia Rosoff. As this mode of interpretation developed, so did the language policy of the United Nations.

A “tug of war” ensued between the consecutive and the simultaneous interpreters. The GA, when adopting the first rules of procedure concerning languages, recommended a thorough enquiry into the question of the installation of “telephonic” systems of interpretation and to arrange for the establishment of such a system. That is why, at the beginning, simultaneous interpreters were called, with a degree of cynicism, the *téléphonistes* by their consecutive colleagues.

However, simultaneous interpretation prospered even though the system collapsed in the first experiment. But, once it had started running, it was a source of wonderment that a person could sit at a microphone and so fluently pass from one language into another. The first official

mention of this mode was in December 1946, in an Assembly decision on the simultaneous interpretation system[4], which recommended that the practice be continued and requested that two conference rooms be equipped with simultaneous interpretation apparatus. The Assembly also recommended studying the advisability of installing a wireless system of simultaneous interpretation, in preference to the present equipment.

Finally, on November 1947, the GA decided that "simultaneous interpretation [should] be adopted as a permanent service to be used alternatively or in conjunction with consecutive interpretation as the nature of debates require"[5]. More rooms were equipped with the system, and over time, the simultaneous mode prevailed. This made multilingual debate easier and faster, and allowed the interpretation of more languages.

The Khrushchev incident

The language policy of the United Nations evolved and all five official languages gradually became working languages. Spanish became in 1948 the third working language;[6] Russian, the fourth, in 1968;[7, 8] and Chinese, the fifth, in 1973.[9, 10] Finally, Arabic became the sixth official language in 1973., enjoying equal status with all the other languages.[11] In December 1980, it joined the other five official and working languages.[12]
Today, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish are both official and the working languages.[13]

In our film, interpreter Nicolas Spoov narrates a well known episode in the history of the General Assembly when he was interpreting in the English booth in 1960. "The Soviet delegation was sitting right in front of me. There was Khrushchev, with Gromyko on the far side. Prime Minister Macmillan was making his famous speech of the 'winds of change' sweeping across Africa. Khrushchev listened, courtesy of the Russian interpreter, and he became progressively more agitated. Then at one point he started hammering with his hands on the table. No notice was taken. Khrushchev obviously wanted to make a point of order. He took off his shoe and banged with it on the table. That, of course, brought the house down – total consternation. Khrushchev, whom I could barely hear through the window, was not speaking into the microphone, he was just standing in the middle of the hall and what I thought he said was: 'I shall not permit you to engage in capitalist propaganda here'. I thought I grasped that, opened my mike and said that in English into the microphone. Macmillan, who had lost his earphone, said 'Well, I wish somebody would translate that for me!' "

Today, in 2008, there are two major new challenges for the profession: one is webcasting, and the other is adjusting the working environment, the "booths", to the new demands and changes. With the advent of Internet, interpreters work for a much wider, but invisible, public audience, so they are more exposed. This causes even more stress for interpreters. These challenges must be faced in an effort to regulate the way in which interpreters work with Internet, as well as webcasting with interpretation. Interpreters must be protected from any liability and be made less vulnerable, in order to preserve the very essence of the profession, the oral nature of interpretation.

UN interpreter Evelyn Moggio-Ortiz's film, "The Interpreters: A Historical Perspective", will be released soon on DVD.

[1] "Turjuman" describes in Arabic someone who clarifies, explains, and does away with ambiguities.

[2] General Assembly Resolution 2 (I) on "Rules of procedure concerning languages", First GA Session, 1 February 1946.

[3] The trial of the major war criminals by the International Military Tribunal (IMT) began on November 20, 1945 in Nuremberg, Germany.

[4] GA Resolution 75 (I) on "Simultaneous interpretation system" (Ist GA Session, 2nd part).

[5] GA Resolution 152 (II) on "Simultaneous interpretation", 15 November 1947.

[6] GA Resolution 247 (III), 7 December 1948.

[7] GA Resolution 2479 (XXIII), 1752th plenary meeting, 21 December 1968.

[8] GA Resolution 2553 (XXIV) amends the rules of procedure 52,53 and 55 to include Russian as working language.

[9] GA Resolution 3190 (XXVIII), 18 December 1973.

[10] Idem.

[11] GA Resolution 34/226, 20 December 1979.

[12] GA Resolution 35/219, 17 December 1980.

[13] Rules 51 and 52 on official and working languages and interpretation.

Reference: *UN Special*, No. 678, November 2008.
http://www.unspecial.org/UNS678/t21.html