

A. T. Pilley

THE INTERPRETER

It will probably surprise you I begin this talk by telling you that I am here under false pretences. By this I mean that it is only with the strictest of reservations that interpreting can be grouped with translating and teaching as a primary career, as been done today.

The truth about interpreting, alas, is almost the direct reverse of the popular view on the subject. Most people think that there are hundreds or even thousands of jobs waiting to be picked up and that interpreting is one of the most promising careers for gifted young linguist. In actual fact it is nothing of the sort. If this morning I dash a great many hopes and dispel some of the fog misconception with which the subject is obscured perhaps I will be acquitted of the charge of false pretence. And if my words reach the ears of some of that host of starry-eyed youngsters who are dreaming of one day becoming interpreters I will perhaps have shown them that, in an overwhelming majority they are chasing a will-o-the-wisp.

As I shall show later, there is room for less than 60 new interpreters, conference interpreters that is, each year, spread over the whole world, of which this country's share is less than three. If you compare these figures with the completely unrealistic number of 20,000 students at the so-called Interpreters! Schools in Europe alone, you will realise that there are many, many thousands of youngsters who are simply not "with it" and who are pathetically cherishing a completely unrealistic ambition.

After this gloomy introduction and before I justify this rather sinister statement let me define my terms and give a description of the habits, habitat and rewards of the animal I am presenting to you, the interpreter.

The term "interpreter" in the context of a careers symposium has only one precise meaning: *International Conference Interpreter*. "Oh, but what about all the other kinds of professional interpreter?" you will doubtless ask. "The business interpreter, the court interpreter, the 'ad hoc' interpreter?" My answer to that simple question is equally simple. In all probability such an animal just doesn't exist, for it is most unlikely, in England at any rate, that anyone lives on that sort of interpretation alone. I am not denying the existence of business, court, and ad

hoc interpreting; but in my 30 years as a practising professional linguist in charge of a translating and interpreting agency and my twenty-one years as a Council Member of the Institute of Linguists, the only “career ad hoc interpreter” I have ever known was a bus company man I met at Piccadilly Circus in 1935 who had ten flags on his tunic and really did seem to chat at least five of the ten languages concerned quite intelligibly.

Thirty years have elapsed but the position in 1965 is basically unchanged. To get the most up-to-date information I enquired of several concerns most likely to have professional ad hoc interpreters on their staffs, B.E.A, London Transport, Cook’s, and some department stores. Their replies were almost identical: “We have no interpreters as such; but we have plenty of linguists on normal jobs and we call on them at a moment’s notice when we need interpretation.”

There is no doubt that many a business man and industrialist who knows no foreign language may occasionally require an interpreter to speak or negotiate with his counterpart who knows English. In the huge majority of such cases he calls upon a colleague in his own concern – and who can blame him? – Who *does* know languages and has a thorough knowledge of the subject to boot. In some cases his firm, if it is a large one, has its own tame translator or team of translators and it is there that he usually draws for this ad help. Sometimes an agency is called upon and the translator who happens to be fluent with his tongue as well as skilful with his pen, and who likes to take a rest from the arduous labour of his written work, accepts the assignment. I say “take a rest” because this type of interpreting is relatively easy, very often entertaining, and involves no special discipline or academic training.

Doubtless, as our export drive gets under way, more and more bi-and multilingual communication will be required, yet” plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”, and I have no doubt whatever that business and industrial concerns will be able to draw upon the members of their own staff who in increasing numbers will have realised that knowledge of languages is a valuable adjunct, even if not an end in itself, and will have the sense to become linguists, enthusiastic amateur interpreters as it were.

To sum up: ad hoc interpreting is an activity, not a profession, much less a career.

This leaves us with the conference interpreter, a real animal this time, as large as life – indeed, often larger than life.

Conference interpreting is in every sense a career, with its rules, its methods, its code of conduct and its professional association.

First a description; there are two main types of interpreting – consecutive and simultaneous. Consecutive is the first in time and the first in skill. It is the means whereby a speech is delivered in one language and is then interpreted into another language, whatever its length or its complexity. Simultaneous is even more spectacular and probably better known. The interpreter sits in a booth and, as he hears the original speech, interprets it as it flows, without rest or pause, into the other language, into English if he is an Englishman, into French if he is a Frenchman, and so on. By the way, conference languages are few in number. At the United Nations they are English, French Spanish, Russian and Chinese. (The latter is rarely used for it is only an official language and rarely a working language). In England the main conference languages are English and French, with German, Russian and Spanish a long way behind and Italian even further back. As for other languages, they occur so rarely here that they can to all intents and purposes be left out of account.

The second system, simultaneous, is more and more widely used, not only at the United Nations and its Specialized Agencies, but at the only at the Council of Europe, NATO, OECD, EEC and all manner of inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, and several Parliaments in four out of the five continents.

The work is fascinating and, I suppose, fairly remunerative, since the income, both of free-lance and of permanent interpreters, ranges from about £1,500 to about £3,5000 a year, usually tax-free in the case of persons attached to the United Nations and most of the international organizations and often with additional benefits, such as family allowances, home leave with fare paid for the interpreter and his family every two years, thirty day's leave a year, increments based on the cost-of-living index, an installation allowance, a provident fund, an insurance scheme and a special educational grant.

Well, where do false pretences come in, if conference interpreting is so interesting and not exactly on the bread-line? Because it is such a *restricted*

profession, restricted on both sides: supply and demand. On the supply side, because so few persons have the unusual combination of qualities required: a razor-sharp mind, blitz reactions, exceptional nervous and physical stamina, a wide and varied educational background, a capacity for public speaking and, of course, a perfect knowledge of languages: two active conference languages both ways, or two or more passive languages into one or more active languages.

You will notice that I mention language proficiency last. I do so advisedly, for to the conference interpreter, linguistic skill is chiefly a means to an end, just like hands to a concert pianist or legs to figure-skater. To quote a brilliant study on conference interpreting which Madame Nilski has just submitted to the Royal Commission of Enquiry on Bi-lingualism and Bi-culturalism in Canada: “Interpreting is a ‘tool’, that must restore instant communication wherever languages places a barrier to direct understanding. Like any expensive and delicate instrument, it must be handled proficiently. To be *at all* good, it has to be *very* good! Anything produced short of *understanding* can only amount to *Misunderstanding!*”

Now a word about demand, and this is the crux of my talk. Conference interpreting is almost certainly far and away the smallest liberal profession. In the whole world, for all the languages, there are probably fewer than, 1,000 interpreters. In Great Britain there exist only twelve – repeat twelve – posts for permanent interpreters, some of which include other duties. LACI, the London Association of Conference Interpreters, has only 31 members, including 24 free-lance interpreters, only eight of whom have interpreting as their sole means of livelihood. The rest have other occupations and take time off for a given conference.

Within the last month I have written to colleagues who head the Interpreters’ Division at a number of international organizations, asking for the latest figures on their strength. The replies are striking. I shall quote in full the reply of Mr. Daniel Hogg, Chief Interpreter at the United Nations, New York, (an Englishman, incidentally):

“Dear Ted, Thank you for your letter. As we are in the middle of the General Assembly I know you will forgive me if I make my answer sharp and to the point.

(a) The total number of permanent interpreter post at the New York headquarters is 55.

(b) We took on two new interpreters in 1961, five in 1962, five in 1963, two in 1964 and two in 1965.”

So, a total of 16 new interpreters in five years, an average intake of just over three per annum!

NATO, Standardization of Military Equipment, London, has had a total of five permanent interpreters between 1961 and 1965, with two replacements in 1962 and one replacement in 1963.

NATO Paris has 27 interpreters, with one replacement in 1965, two in 1964, two in 1963, six each in 1961 and 1962.

WEU London, has one interpreter, with *no* replacement in the last ten years.

FAO Rome, has a sum total of three permanent interpreters, with only one replacement in four years.

SHAPE, Paris, has a total of five interpreters with only one replacement in five years.

OECD has fifteen interpreters. It took on three interpreters in 1962, none since then.

There is not the slightest doubt that the same meagre tally is typical of all the other international organizations. The EEC, the Common Market organization in Brussels, which is the largest “user” of interpreters in Europe, perhaps in the world, has 47 permanent interpreters. Unfortunately for us – unfortunately in the context of language careers of course – Great Britain is not a member of the Common Market, whose official languages are French, Dutch, German and Italian – not English.

The outlook is even bleaker when you consider that many international organizations have no permanent interpreters at all. IMCO, the only U.N. Specialized Agency stationed in the United Kingdom, only uses free-lance interpreters as the occasion arises. The same is true, with three exceptions, of all the other inter-governmental and international organizations with headquarters in London.

Interesting statistics are issued by AIIC, the Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence, our own international organization, stationed in Paris,

whose members are disseminated in 35 countries throughout the world. AIIC now has 523 members, 163 permanent and 360 free-lance, 291 women and 232 men.

It is astonishing, but it is a fact, that the ever-growing number of international conferences in a contracting world is serviced by an absurdly small number of “communication”, another name sometimes given to conference interpreters.

The total number of AIIC members has, of course, been rising steadily, *pari passu* with the increase in conferences. We were 17 between 1917 and 1944, 147 between 1945 and 1950, 359 between 1951 and 1963, an average of 29 new members per annum since 1945. For a variety of reasons all practising interpreters are not AIIC members, but if the 29 is doubled (and this is most probably over-generous), we have a total of 58 new interpreters each year, which, I think you will agree, is an absurdly small number if you consider that that number covers all the countries of the world. In the London Association of Conference Interpreters we were 10 ten years ago; we are 31 today. This is a proportionate increase of over 300 per cent, but a total rise in actual strength of only 21, or 2.1 bodies per annum, which is surely paltry by any standard.

So, still a bird of ill-omen, I come back to my initial theme. Interpreting is certainly a career, but career open to an infinitesimal number of highly-skilled specialists. Do not let us in England make the dangerous mistake of which other have been guilty: the setting-up of so-called Interpreters' Schools. As the Canadian report puts it, these Schools – most of them in Europe – rate a batting average of one successful student out of every 200 or so students admitted. The report goes on to point out that the Sorbonne school (and I quote) “does considerably better with one in ten to one in five, whist the London *Working Party*, which is not even a school in the current sense, tops the list with a score of over five in ten. “These figures are due to our practice at the Linguists' Club of giving applicants a rigorous aptitude test at entry, so that training is only given to first-class linguists who prove that they possess the necessary qualities.

To quote the Canadian report again, fine intentions or high ambitions alone are, like anywhere else, a poor substitute for competence.

In England, then, there are about 30 qualified conference interpreters all told, with another dozen or so in the pipe-line. Compare that with other liberal professions:

39,293	Chartered Accountants
20,700	Solicitors
2,118	Barristers
21,534	Family Doctors
8,604	Surgeons
249,445	Teachers*
18,526	Journalists

I think you must agree that I was not exaggerating when I called our number absurdly small and that the label “false pretences” is not quite so paradoxical as it sounds.

From what I have said I think it is crystal-clear that those who give advice on careers will be doing a grave disservice to 99.99 per cent of the promising young linguists, thirsty for advice and dazzled by the apparent fun and glitter of a spectacular career, if they do not explain that interpreting is a tight, tough, exacting and remorseless profession. But be on the look-out, please, for that 0.01 per cent because the newcomer, provided he or she *can* make the arduous grade, will be welcomed in what has been called “surely the most exuberantly, bewilderingly surrealist profession in the world” and one which I personally wouldn’t change for any other.

*of whom 3,200 are members of the Modern Language Association.

Source: Conférence inédite de l’Institute of Linguists, 9 déc. 1965.