Conference interpreting at the United Nations

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) is an entity created by treaty with the ultimate goal of working in good faith on issues of common interest. The aims of the UN are the following: maintain international peace and security; foster international cooperation in social, cultural and economic terms; develop close relationships between nations based on the guiding principles of self-determination and equal rights; and recognise the fundamental rights of the entire world population. Conference interpreting is socially situated and carried out in a particular community of practice. This community takes the form of the organisation in which the interpreting takes place, and is characterised by the topics interpreted, as well as the profession’s norms, culture and ideology.

This chapter presents an overview of conference interpreting at the UN, from its beginnings to the challenges of the present day. It endeavours to provide an overview of the accreditation examinations, the various categories of interpreter employed by the organisation, the challenges involved and the working conditions.

Historical developments

The predecessor of the United Nations, the League of Nations (LON), was founded under the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 to ensure peace and security, foster international cooperation and prevent the devastation wrought in Europe by the Great War from ever coming to pass again. By the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, many members, notably including powerful states such as Italy, Germany and Japan, had abandoned the League of Nations in favour of the traditional power blocs built on alliances of defence and mutual self-interest. After President Wilson’s prominence in the establishment of the LON, the fact that the US did not join the organisation was a setback for its political meaning and strength in the interwar period. In 1945, after the end of the Second World War, 51 countries founded the United Nations.

The UN consists of six main bodies. Five have their base at UN headquarters in New York: the General Assembly (the principal deliberative body), the Security Council (charged with maintaining international peace and security), the Economic and Social Council
(ECOSOC, for the coordination of UN social, economic and related activities, together with that of the specialised agencies), the Trusteeship Council (responsible for the international supervision of 11 Trust Territories administered by seven Member States) and the Secretariat, which carries out the organisation’s administrative work on a day-to-day basis. The International Court of Justice, which constitutes the sixth body and can be found in The Hague in the Netherlands, serves as the main judicial body of the UN and is responsible for the settlement of legal disputes between Member States and the provision of advisory opinions to the UN and its specialised agencies.

In the provisions made in 1946, it was stipulated that English, French, Spanish, Russian and Chinese were to be the official languages, with only English and French to be used as working languages. Each of the other three official languages—Spanish, Russian and Chinese—was eventually awarded the status of working language, in 1948, 1968 and 1973, respectively. This meant that any of the five official languages could be used to deliver speeches, which would then be interpreted in consecutive (the only modality used in early meetings), first into English and then into French as necessary. A representative would have to bring his own interpreter if he or she intended to deliver a speech in any non-official language. This convoluted process often led to exceptionally lengthy meetings; therefore, Colonel Léon Dostert was invited to help find a practical approach to overcoming the language barrier. He was chosen because of his involvement in the pioneering use of simultaneous interpreting at the Nuremberg Trials (Gaiba 1998), and simultaneous interpreting was deemed to be the most suitable modality following its success at Nuremberg.

The first procedural rules for language use were subsequently adopted by the General Assembly, which recommended an exhaustive inquiry into the possibility of introducing a telephone interpreting system and the logistics of setting up a system of this nature (UNGA 1946). In 1946, Dostert organised the first simultaneous test. The UN interpreters were sceptical of the idea. This hostile attitude led to the creation of two interpreting teams: the elite team of consecutive interpreters (Baigorri-Jalón 1999), and the simultaneous team, condescendingly labelled ‘the telephonists’. The latter group received intensive training under Dostert’s wing, and simultaneous gradually took over as the most commonly used modality (see Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez & Payás, Chapter 1, and Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume).

Even though simultaneous interpreters were initially expected to work exclusively into their mother tongue to avoid delivery with non-native pronunciation, this became problematic when Chinese became a working language. Interpreters who could interpret from Chinese were extremely scarce; so, to overcome this problem, Chinese interpreters were given the remit to work both into and from Chinese. In 1973, this norm was extended to Arabic-mother-tongue interpreters when it too became an official and working language.\(^1\)

The General Assembly took the decision to provide a permanent simultaneous interpreting service in November 1947 (UNGA 1947). This made it easier and less time-consuming to conduct multilingual debates and increase the number of languages. The two interpreting teams subsequently merged; a number of the consecutive interpreters adapted to simultaneous, whereas others left the UN altogether. This ‘in-between generation’ of interpreters (Baigorri-Jalón 2004: 89) consisted of interpreters who had often graduated from an interpreting school, unlike the first generation, who had learnt their profession on the job.

The second generation of interpreters (1960–1980) were trainees or associate-interpreters who often came from other sections of Conference Services, especially Translation. Once selected, these interpreters would undergo three months of UN training, followed by a competitive examination to become bona fide UN interpreters. This examination was the predecessor

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of the Language Competitive Examination (LCE), the UN’s function-and-language-specific examination for the recruitment of staff interpreters.

Yet another generation of interpreters, this time with formal training (undergone by the vast majority of the staff and freelance interpreters working at the UN today), took shape in the 1970s. This generation arrived as conference interpreting schools became more widespread and national professional associations were established, after the inception of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) in 1953. These interpreters threatened industrial action if significant changes were not made to the frequently exhausting working schedule, which led to an investigation being ordered by the Secretary General and the subsequent agreed improvement in said schedule. The new conditions stipulated a maximum of seven sessions a week and sessions of no more than three hours’ duration. These conditions are still the norm nowadays.

Working as an interpreter at the United Nations

The UN employs two categories of interpreters: freelance and staff. An agreement signed by both the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and AIIC regulates the working conditions for freelance interpreters who provide short-term interpreting services. This agreement was originally drawn up and signed in 1969 and has since been updated on a regular basis. It covers not only AIIC members but also non-members, and applies when interpreters work for an international organisation affiliated with the CEB. A re-negotiation of the agreement usually takes place once every five years, with the last agreement having been signed in January 2019 (AIIC 2019).

Each UN duty station, New York, Nairobi, Geneva and Vienna, organises, either periodically or on an ad hoc basis, an accreditation examination for those who wish to be listed on its freelance interpreter roster. In all cases, recorded speeches are commonly used as examination material. Contrary to what has been the norm in the past, according to which freelance examination dates were not published and exams were taken in situ, in 2020 it was decided that the UN accreditation examination would henceforth be announced on the UN website and taken online.

Those who wish to be employed as staff interpreters must pass the Language Competitive Examination (LCE). The 1990s saw the introduction of this examination in its current guise, the main purpose of which was and is to provide a supply of interpreters on a roster able to fill any staff position that may arise at any time. The LCE is always administered by the UN’s New York headquarters (see also Jourdenais, Chapter 10, in this volume) and advertised on the UN website. It may be held once every two or three years for specific language combinations and once every five years for specific booths. It is worth noting that UN Regulations prohibit the recruitment of staff interpreters outside this process.

Contrary to the European Union accreditation test, only simultaneous is tested in both the UN LCE and the freelance accreditation. This is the case not only for the UN but also for its specialised agencies, which may also organise exams to test freelance candidates, although some of them are not officially announced and are an internal procedure. There are specialised agencies that hire an interpreter for only one day and then have senior interpreters evaluate the performance before deciding whether to hire the interpreter on a regular basis. Some associated organisations and agencies provide a dummy booth for candidates to use over the course of several months in order to familiarise themselves with the organisation’s work and specific aspects such as in-house terminology and meeting types. Eventually, when a particular candidate feels ready, the staff interpreters will evaluate whether the candidate’s rendition on a chosen day is
of a sufficiently high standard. The fact that all the UN evaluation procedures mentioned in this paragraph exclusively test simultaneous is due to the current scarcity of opportunities to work in consecutive within the UN system. In fact, simultaneous is the modality used at most conferences. Consecutive is sometimes used for external conferences and missions, and even then, since consecutive is not tested in the recruitment process, interpreters can decide whether to accept consecutive assignments or not.²

Candidates applying to the UN LCE need first to create a profile in the UN Careers portal. The Human Resources Exam Section will then proceed with the first screening. The applications are then assessed, and the candidates’ performances evaluated by an examination board comprising senior interpreters provided by different duty stations. In the eliminatory first part of the two-part examination, candidates with English, French, Spanish or Russian as their main language are invited to interpret three 8–10-minute speeches of increasingly challenging content and delivery rate from each of their two source languages. A candidate with Chinese or Arabic as their main language is invited to interpret three speeches into this main language from their B language, followed by three speeches into their B language from the main language. In contrast to other international organisations, where staff interpreters are asked to prepare speeches, at the UN the standard practice is to choose speeches from real meetings, particularly speeches that have previously been interpreted by staff interpreters. On the day of the exam, candidates will have to interpret six recorded speeches. In each case the speaker’s name and position, details of the original venue and occasion, and the original delivery date will be provided.

First of all, an assessment is made of the candidate’s recorded interpretation from English, and failure to interpret any speech to a satisfactory standard leads to automatic elimination. English is eliminatory as it is currently the most spoken official working language at UN meetings. For the English booth, French is the first language assessed, followed by Russian or Spanish. Candidates who successfully interpret all six speeches are invited to the second part of the LCE, which consists of a competency-based interview (see Ruiz Rosendo & Diur 2017a, 2017b).

LCE candidates are assessed on correctness of grammar, linguistic cohesion, consistency of meaning, completeness and fluency of delivery, even when one or more of these qualities is not present in the source speech (Baigorri-Jalón & Travieso Rodríguez 2017). In fact, the interpreting community, of which the UN is a part, traditionally accepts these criteria as an assurance of quality, despite the fact that the concept of quality itself is commonly held to be vague (see Pradas Macías & Zwischenberger, Chapter 19, in this volume).

The number of examination centres to which candidates can travel, at times at significant personal expense, is rather limited (the four UN headquarters and other selected locations based on the number of candidates from that location who sit the exam), but an online version of the LCE was administered for the first time in June 2020 as one of a series of changes that are underway; henceforth the examination will be available from any location. The process is becoming more democratic and inclusive, as costs, for both the candidates and the UN, will be cut; the hope is that geographical representation will be improved by candidates being able to take the LCE from all parts of the world. Candidates will be able to access the platform two weeks prior to the commencement of the LCE process in order to familiarise themselves with the system. They can also practise with a wide selection of sample speeches in an online simulation which reflects the examination.

The LCE has a remarkably low pass rate (< 20 per cent), which is indicative of the demanding nature of the exam. Diur (2015) reveals the challenges presented through two surveys: one of UN staff interpreters and another of senior interpreters responsible for marking
the examination. The first survey brings to light the pressure points that stand in the way of candidates reaching the UN’s high performance standards in the LCE: stress, unfamiliarity with UN topics, insufficient general knowledge and knowledge of UN structure, issues with both the main language and the passive languages, and fast speed. The second survey mirrors the findings of the first in terms of issues with delivery rate, main language and passive languages, with difficulty understanding different accents accounting for issues with the latter.

**Outreach programme: working with universities**

As a solution to the consequent shortage of staff interpreters, and at the same time bearing in mind the imminent retirement of UN language service professionals, the Under-Secretary General, together with the Chief of the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM), initiated an outreach programme in 2007 whose main aim was to develop a partnership with interpreter and translator training centres.

The three main aims of the outreach programme are: (1) to raise the profile of UN career opportunities in language services; (2) to offer applicants guidance in their preparation for competitive examinations, such as the LCE and thus improve the pass rate; and (3) to find new ways for the UN to work more closely with language training centres. The ‘MoU network’ derives from a memorandum of understanding signed by both the UN and participating universities (23 to date, United Nations Language Careers, n.d.) and constitutes a key component of the outreach programme. Given that a number of universities could potentially be useful to the UN’s long-term planning and replacement needs, other agreements have been drawn up and signed that award these institutions the status of MoU network associate. Consequently, they have the right to regular involvement in the network’s projects, where they can participate as observers. The Remote Practicum Agreement (RPA) offers another opportunity for partner universities to sign an agreement with the UN and gives talented Interpreting and Translation students the chance to gain remote practical experience.

**Challenges of interpreting at the UN**

Over the years, the UN’s working environment has changed considerably in terms of content, political relevance, meeting format, information and communication technology, and an ever higher number of participants (Baigorri-Jalón & Travieso Rodríguez 2017). Specific changes have been the increased use of English by delegates; the increase in the number of Member States; the inclusion of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as participants, changing the typology of entities that intervene at the UN; the increasing presence of more technical and less political-ideological themes and the homogeneity of the political speech, partly as a consequence of the delegates using a non-native, often unconventional English (see Albl-Mikasa, Chapter 39, in this volume); and the proliferation of informal meetings and the search for consensus (Baigorri-Jalón 2003). The standard of interpreting has undoubtedly been affected by all these changes.

The speaking time afforded to delegates at the UN has been progressively reduced, due to a combination of a greater number of speakers and sessions of a regulated length which must conform to stricter calendars. This reduction in speaking time has led to an increase in the speed of speaker interventions (Baigorri-Jalón & Travieso Rodríguez 2017; Diur 2015). Unscripted speeches have generally been replaced by scripted statements, since delegates now want to fit as much as they can into the limited time available. Consequently, the UN increasingly relies on simultaneous interpreting with text, which combines simultaneous interpreting
skills with those of sight translation (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume). Interpreter performance is impacted by the additional challenges that such speeches present, including dense chunks, low-frequency vocabulary, lexical density, complex syntactical structures—unnatural in spoken language—and a high level of internal cohesion and coherence. While unusual in oral speech, these features are, however, generally frequent in written language.

Importantly, in a survey of 50 professional conference interpreters, 92 per cent considered the text helpful and only 2 per cent considered its presence a handicap (Cammoun, Davies, Ivanov & Naimushin 2009). However, it bears mentioning that the interpreter does not always have access to the written text. In spite of these results, there remains a lack of clarity as to how exactly the complexity of the task is modified by access to this text (Seeber 2015), a conjecture that is borne out by a lack of pertinent research. Something that is generally accepted in the literature is that the reduction in forethought demanded of the speaker often leads to a subconscious increase in delivery rate.

An analysis of word rate per minute was carried out for speeches given at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC); over the course of two weeks at the 16th Session, two English speeches per day were chosen at random (Barghout, Ruiz Rosendo & Varela García 2015). The average rate was found to be 149.12 wpm. In order to confirm the differences in delivery rate between languages, a second analysis was conducted, this time involving the measurement of delivery rate in both English and French (see Ruiz Rosendo, Varela García & Barghout 2020). A random selection was made of 42 speeches given at the 24th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group, 21 from the review of Namibia and 21 from that of Belgium. The average delivery rate for the English and French speeches was 162 and 160 wpm, respectively.

A high average delivery rate is therefore confirmed by the above results; the fact that the results for the two languages are similar has to do with both the context of the speeches’ delivery, very limited time available, and their style, reflecting the reading of a script. According to the reference values posited by Setton and Dawrant (2016), the total values arrived at by Barghout et al. (2015) and Ruiz Rosendo et al. (2020) indicate that the delivery rate could be qualified as ‘challenging’, for the HRC (140–160 wpm), and ‘difficult’, for the UPR.

Barghout et al. (2015) analysed to what extent UN staff interpreters make omissions as a result of a high delivery rate and concluded that the probability of omitting both redundant conjunctions and synonyms rises with the speed of delivery. When the same data were analysed for a second time (Ruiz Rosendo et al. 2020), it was found that a high delivery rate (>160 wpm) negatively affects interpreter performance, a consequence of this being that meaningful information is lost, even by seasoned interpreters, due to a greater frequency of random omissions. This finding is in line with that of other authors who argue that frequency of omissions rises in parallel with speed of delivery (Pio 2003; Ruiz Rosendo & Galván 2019). This occurs even when the work is carried out by established professionals with experience in interpreting written speeches delivered at high speed.

A recent study (Arias Rivera 2020) has confirmed the assumption that it is the situation and not the language per se which has an impact on the delivery rate. This study calculated the average speed of speeches delivered in Spanish at the General Debate, the annual event that congregates world leaders at the UN Headquarters in New York to discuss global issues. At this event, speakers (Heads of State and Government) do not have limited time to speak and their speeches are characterised by ceremony and gravitas (for a description of the typology of UN meetings, see Baigorri-Jalón 2005). The total average was 120 wpm, a value that would
be categorised as ‘moderate’ (Setton & Dawrant 2016). This means that in the General Debate speech rates are lower than in other settings.

In any case, the challenge at the General Debate is more likely to be accents than delivery rate. There are 193 member states whose representatives address the General Assembly using only six official languages, which means that the majority of these representatives will necessarily communicate through a language other than their first language, mostly in English. Delegates may speak in languages other than the six official languages. In that case, they are required to bring an interpreter as part of their delegation.

The increasing use of English as a lingua franca has an obvious impact on the workload of and stress suffered by the interpreters in the different booths: it means that the English booth works less time but, when they work, they are listened to by an overwhelming majority of delegates; it also means that the other booths work almost all the time, mainly from English.

Strong native and non-native accents can indeed be an additional source of stress. In fact, the AIIC’s 2001 workload study on stress and burnout in both staff interpreters and freelancers finds difficult accents to be a significant stressor (Mackintosh 2002); the results may well have been published almost 20 years ago, but the citing of accents as a source of stress remains relevant to the focus of the current chapter.

Another challenge is to be found in the particularities of the UN jargon, which insiders refer to as UNese. As Baigorri-Jalón and Travieso Rodríguez (2017) argue, many language professionals agree that the UN has seven languages, the six official languages plus UNese as a seventh language, which is part and parcel of the language combination at the organisation. This ‘seventh language’ or jargon would be spoken in the several dialects used by the representatives of the different UN bodies and agencies.

Lastly, a recent major challenge for the UN has been the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequences of which meant that booths and equipment were temporarily no longer accessible and face-to-face meetings were cancelled. This has had a significant impact on the way that multilateral meetings have been held in the second half of 2020, as described below (see United Nations Department of Global Communications 2020).

Future challenges

Several of the challenges that conference interpreting at the UN will face in the coming years arise as a result of the extensive deployment of information and communication technologies, such as the ever more frequent application of videoconference platforms and remote interpreting (RI) strategies to official meetings (see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume). This process has been accelerated by the outbreak of COVID-19.

Resorting to RI is not new. It was used in 1976 at the 19th Session of the General Conference of UNESCO with the objective of testing different remote conferencing technologies. Two years later, the United Nations followed suit and experimented with this modality during a teleconference that linked New York and Buenos Aires via a satellite connection (Mouzourakis 1996). The interpreters at the latter event found videoconferencing conditions to be inferior to those of simultaneous interpreting in a standard meeting room, with a loss of visual information arising from poor image quality being one of a number of problems that were mentioned. Interpreters perceived videoconferencing to be adequate for interactions of a relatively ‘neutral’ nature, including the exchange of information and, to a lesser degree, cooperative problem solving, but not for negotiation or conflict resolution, when direct personal, and often informal, contact is essential, among other interactions.
Another challenge will be the administration of online versions of the LCE and freelance examinations, something that is not exclusive to the UN. Potential issues include IT dependability, internet connection stability, verifying candidates’ identity, and the sheer increase in the number of candidates who will apply to take the test (as a result of the fewer financial hurdles to participation).

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, videoconferences (with the delegate in another room) and remote interpreting (with the interpreter out of the room) were rarely considered in UN agreements with professional associations, but with the rise in demand for remote interpreting at international organisations, clarification is needed concerning interpreter recruitment, the concept of professional domicile, and new remuneration standards for freelancers who work remotely from a growing number of hubs worldwide, among other professional issues. Additionally, Roziner and Shlesinger (2010) have demonstrated that working remotely leads to higher levels of stress and fatigue, while Mouzourakis (1996) refers to the consequent sense of alienation. These negative factors call into question the validity of current agreements between the UN and professional associations. This been said, more recent studies (see Seeber, Keller, Amos & Hengl 2019) have found that the interpreters’ attitudes towards RI have improved, something that is probably due to the technological advances of recent years.

Another endemic challenge that will worsen with an increasing use of remote interpreting is speed. High delivery rate is usually associated with the use of texts that have been written to be read. If speakers deliver their speeches away from headquarters, they may be less inclined to share the text with the interpreters. Another challenge will be listening to bad-quality sound, which may have an impact on the interpreter’s capacity to deliver an accurate rendition and on the interpreter’s well-being. Similarly, if the interpreters work from home or from a hub, they will not have the possibility to personally address the interpreting service to get the speeches. Currently the team leader or the conference officer can go to the room and ask delegates for the texts if interpreters do not have them. If the interpreters are not in the room, it will probably be more difficult to get and distribute not only the speeches, but all relevant materials. It is worth mentioning that sometimes the texts are only available a couple of minutes before the meeting starts and communicating face to face saves time. This being said, if a reliable system is put in place allowing for the speech to immediately appear on an interpreter’s device, that might actually save time. In any case, working with electronic documents will constitute a radical change for interpreters. Many interpreters still prefer to work with hard copies because it facilitates the preparation of speeches, according to interpreters working at the ILO Governing Body in the October–November session 2015 (Jacobs 2017). This is also the generalised opinion at the UN.

Conclusion

There have been a number of important changes in conference interpreting at the UN. Despite the ongoing systematic research on conference interpreting and the consequent greater understanding of the complexities involved, there are few studies that specifically focus on the work carried out by interpreters in this context, in particular, and at international organisations, in general.

It would be desirable for research in the field of interpreting at international organisations to expand in the near future, together with our understanding of interpreters’ experiences and needs in specific organisations. Such research could further explore the challenges faced by interpreters as a consequence of the changes that are taking place in the organisations they work for. There are issues that will require a great deal of further analysis, this being particularly
true of the impact of different factors, such as speed and accents, and new realities, such as remote interpreting, on the interpreter’s performance and well-being. Further analysis is also required in order to verify whether or not current interpretation training programmes are still adequate for the training of interpreters, given the evolution experienced by the profession, and to explore the topic of employability at the UN.

Given the nature of this field of study, it would be encouraging to see more joint research among scholars, interpreter trainers and organisations that recruit interpreters, and closer collaboration of the above players with the users of interpreting services at international organisations.

Notes

1 Even today, two-way booths that operate in teams of three are provided for Chinese and Arabic, due to the requirement that an interpreter has a B language with which to work both into and from his or her mother tongue. This is an exception to the dynamic of the other booths, which are occupied by only two interpreters at any one time.

2 While consecutive was used previously for bilateral meetings with the Secretary General, the modality currently preferred is *bidule* interpreting—the portable *bidule* consists of a microphone for the interpreter and headsets for the participants that together enable the practice of simultaneous interpreting away from permanent booths—so that these meetings may more easily fit into his tight itinerary. Those interpreters who are based in Geneva and New York may be invited—and have the right to refuse—to go on missions abroad with the Secretary General himself or members of the Security Council. Geneva-based interpreters are most frequently invited to accompany Human Rights missions to particularly problematic parts of the world, where meetings often take place in makeshift contexts lacking the facilities that would usually be expected—the *bidule* is commonly employed in such contexts. Even so, consecutive still has a role to play when there are more participants than headsets, which might be the case at a press conference, for example.

3 It is worth mentioning that the fact that staff interpreters retire does not prevent them from continuing to work as a freelancer. There are actually no age limits for freelance interpreters.

4 The outreach programme now extends to the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation (PAMCIT)—currently comprising six universities located in Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, Egypt, Kenya and Mozambique, one of these having acquired MoU status—whose objective is the provision of support for sub-regional, regional and international organisations working in Africa to be able to contribute to succession planning and consequently to intergovernmental processes (see Wallmach & Okagbue, Chapter 17, in this volume).

5 ‘Review’ is defined in this context as the examination of a particular country’s situation in terms of respect of human rights.

Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

Further reading


References


