Conference interpreting in Russia

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The history of interpreting in Russia

The history of interpreting in Russia can be broken down into periods consistent with the various stages in the development of the Russian language: the Old Rus’ period (ninth to the fourteenth century); the Tsardom of Russia, or Muscovy (fifteenth to seventeenth century); the age of Peter the Great and the subsequent formative period of modern Russian (eighteenth to nineteenth century, the Russian imperial period); the Soviet period (twentieth century), and finally the modern period (after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the formation of the Russian Federation as an independent state) (Burlyay et al. 2015).

From Old Rus’ to the Russian Empire

In 864, Cyril and Methodius, the two Greek monks known as the Apostles of the Slavs, were sent by the Byzantine Emperor to spread Christianity among Slavic peoples. They started by creating an alphabet, later to be called Cyrillic, and used it to translate several religious texts from Greek to Old Church Slavonic. It is then that Old Rus’ is considered to have acquired a script and a literature, with a resulting need for translations. Russian princes are known to have used interpreters’ services in negotiations with Mongol khans who ruled over Rus’ during the Tatar-Mongol ‘Yoke’ period (1243–1480).

Prince Ivan Kalita of Moscow, who conducted extensive trade with the Golden Horde, had a great need for interpreters. The word for ‘interpreter’ used then, tolmach, is of Proto-Slavic and Proto-Turkic origin. Initially, the tolmaches were Golden Horde soldiers who spoke Russian and lived among civilian Tatars in Tatar Sloboda, a settlement along the road leading from Moscow to the Golden Horde. The tolmaches acted exclusively as interpreters and were hired for ambassadorial missions, negotiations, feasts, and the like. Later on, interpreters of Tatar origin were joined by Russians who had learned the Tatar language.

The first documented mention of interpreting as an occupation was made in the sixteenth century, when several reports referred to payment for interpreters’ services. Historical documents also mention the dyaks (high-ranking officials) Dmitry Gerasimov, Vlasy Viskovaty, and Ivan Viskovaty, who were both fluent in several foreign languages and shone as diplomats under...
Tsar Ivan the Terrible. Their unique skills and activity contributed greatly to Russia’s close relations with many nations. Translators and interpreters in Muscovy formed a special category of civil servants on the staff of all the government agencies that were in contact with foreigners.

A special role in the history of interpretation in Russia was played by Posolsky Prikaz, the government’s central diplomatic office, which existed from 1549 to 1720. Its responsibilities included foreign affairs, ransom and exchange of prisoners, as well as the management of some south-eastern territories and certain categories of the ‘service class’ (persons bound by military obligations). Ivan Viskovaty was the first chief of Posolsky Prikaz, from 1549 to 1570. In addition, interpreters acted as couriers, delivering documents from Posolsky Prikaz to other agencies or cities. Before being taken on, translators and interpreters had to pass a language examination and swear loyalty to the monarch. Between 1645 and 1682, Posolsky Prikaz maintained positions for 84 translators and 185 interpreters. Each interpreter had to know at least two foreign languages. The agency trained its own personnel, enrolling young men as apprentices to experienced employees who taught them languages and the intricacies of their job. From 1646, all interpreters employed by Posolsky Prikaz had to be (or become) Orthodox Christians. Unlike translators, many interpreters worked with a combination of Western and Asian languages (Kunenkov 2012).

In 1720, Posolsky Prikaz was disbanded and replaced with the College of Foreign Affairs. Peter the Great’s political reform broadened the country’s economic and cultural ties with European nations, generating a demand for translation of texts on science and technology as well as fiction. The literary standard of Russian began to take shape at the time, enriched not least by translation. As a result of Peter’s reforms, the eighteenth century saw the emergence of an aristocratic class that spoke European languages as fluently as they spoke their mother tongue or, sometimes, even better. As all of them spoke fluent French, they had no need for interpreters, which is probably why no names of outstanding interpreters in nineteenth-century Russia are known. Even so, it was then that the fundamental principles and rules of professional translation and interpreting were laid down.

The Soviet period

In the 1920s and the 1930s, interpreting at official negotiations was done by employees of the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, most of them former diplomats of tsarist Russia, thus establishing a tradition where, for a long time, interpreting in Russia was almost indelibly associated with diplomatic settings (see Slaughter Olsen, Liu & Viaggio, Chapter 5, in this volume).

Until the mid-twentieth century, consecutive interpreting remained the only viable option available for meetings and talks. It is believed that one of the first experiments with simultaneous interpretation was carried out in the Soviet Union in 1928, during the Sixth Congress of the Communist International. The weekly Krasnaya Niva published photographs that year in which interpreters are seen sitting in armchairs in front of the rostrum. Each of them has a bulky contraption around their neck to support a microphone, but no earphones. The interpreters listened directly to the speaker and translated simultaneously (Gofman 1963).

The first specially equipped booths and earphones appeared at the 13th plenary meeting of the Communist International’s Executive Committee held in the USSR in 1933. The interpreters listened to the speakers through earphones. In Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), simultaneous interpreting was first used at the International Congress of Physiology in 1935. Academician Ivan Pavlov’s welcome address was interpreted simultaneously into French, English, and German. After that, simultaneous interpreting was used occasionally at meetings.
of the Communist International’s Executive Committee. It is worth noting, however, that those early experiments with simultaneous interpretation were done only occasionally and mainly boiled down to delivering the voice of an interpreter to foreign listeners without a particular method or system.

Interpreters played an enormous role in the Second World War. Apart from interrogating prisoners and obtaining military intelligence, they were crucial to diplomatic negotiations among the Allies. After the war, a sizeable group of Soviet interpreters worked at the Nuremberg Trials, where Russian was one of the working languages along with English, French, and German (see also Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez & Payás, Chapter 1, in this volume). It was not until the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials that the term ‘simultaneous interpreter’ (переводчик-синхронист (‘perevodchik-sinkhronist’)) came into use in the USSR as the name of a profession. It might be interesting to add that Soviet interpreters at the Nuremberg Trials were also involved in translating endless technical documents as well as verbatim reports of the audiences (Gofman 1963).

Congresses of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union opened up more opportunities to refine the practice and organisation of simultaneous interpreting on a large scale, starting with the 19th Congress in 1952. Ventilated and soundproof booths were installed in the Kremlin specially for the event. They were used to interpret speeches from Russian into other languages. However, interpreting of foreign speeches into Russian was consecutive, performed by an interpreter standing next to the speaker at the rostrum. The system was used in both directions at all subsequent Communist Party congresses and other conferences and forums with foreign participation. It was based on relay interpreting, Russian being the pivot language (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume). Apart from foreign languages, simultaneous interpreting was also done into other languages of the Soviet Union at sessions of the USSR Supreme Soviet. The equipment installed in the Kremlin Palace of Congresses could accommodate up to 29 languages.

For many decades, Soviet interpreter training developed in isolation behind the Iron Curtain. Students were not allowed to go abroad to practise their skills, and no native speakers from abroad were allowed to teach local students. There were few, if any, opportunities for direct communication with foreigners. Despite these limitations, a strong pedagogical tradition emerged, developing some unique teaching methods, and producing numerous top-quality interpreters. (For examples of seminal books on interpreting and translation research and pedagogy, see Baer (2021); Beloruchev (1969); Chernov (1978); Fedorov (1953); Minyar-Beloruchev (1969; 1980); Retsker (1974); Shiryayev (1979)).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the USSR gave massive support to developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America whose leaders had proclaimed plans to build socialist societies. Many international events were held by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), an intergovernmental economic organisation from 1949 to 1991, which comprised all of the socialist countries and included over a dozen associate members and observers. The COMECON headquarters in Moscow employed staff interpreters who provided simultaneous interpretation between 11 languages at international gatherings. Simultaneous interpretation was also used at events hosted by public organisations such as the Soviet Peace Committee, the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO), the Soviet Women’s Committee, etc.

Much of the USSR support to developing countries consisted of supplies of armaments and military hardware, followed by engineers and instructors. As few of those spoke foreign languages, they were accompanied by interpreters, most of them graduates of the Military Institute of Foreign Languages (now the Military University) or the Moscow Pedagogical
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Institute of Foreign Languages (now Moscow State Linguistic University), two of the Soviet Union’s major training centres for translators and interpreters. The Military Institute was famous for having designed some very efficient methods of accelerated interpreter training, and for the great variety of languages it taught (up to 30), including some ‘rare’ languages like Khmer, Albanian, and Amharic.

Country-specific features, main languages, and language pairs

The Russian Federation is a multi-ethnic and a multilingual state. According to UNESCO, the peoples of Russia speak about 130 languages (Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO 2020). Russian is the official state language throughout the whole country. National republics within the Russian Federation have their respective national languages designated as ‘state languages’ alongside Russian. Russian is considered to be one of the most spoken languages in the world and is one of the six working languages of the UN, UNESCO, and a number of other major international organisations.

Most professional interpreters in Russia are native speakers of Russian and use it as their A language, with Russian-English being the most popular combination. While no official statistics exist to verify the number of professionals working with this language pair, the databases of the largest interpretation agencies in Russia have about 300 simultaneous Russian-English interpreters, who specialise in various subject areas, along with several thousand consecutive interpreters. The demand for other language combinations is considerably lower, with dozens rather than hundreds of simultaneous interpreters working on a regular basis. At the same time, the Russian interpretation market has an impressive variety of available language combinations (Russian-German, Russian-French, Russian-Spanish, Russian-Portuguese, Russian-Arabic, Russian-Chinese, Russian-Turkish, Russian-Korean, etc.). The interpreter training system meets market needs and even produces a surplus of interpreters, who thus have to launch their careers amid fierce competition. What is interesting about the Russian interpretation market is that all interpreters are expected to work not only into their A language but also into B (retour), which is what all programmes train them to do.

Interpreting at official events and negotiations at the diplomatic and political levels is provided by high-quality interpreters employed by the Department of Linguistic Support of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Professional associations

There are several professional associations in the Russian translation and interpretation industry. In 1991, the Union of Translators of Russia (UTR) was established. According to its charter, its goals include bringing together Russian translators and interpreters to foster a professional community in Russia, defining priority areas for Russian translation and interpreting industry development, raising the profile of the profession and recognising its contribution to the country’s history, culture, literature, and research, protecting social, legal, economic, and professional rights and interests of translators and interpreters, and promoting them domestically and internationally (Union of Translators of Russia 2020).

Individual professionals as well as groups (legal entities) can become members of the UTR. In 2020, the union comprised 50 regional divisions and 800 active members. The official publication of the UTR is the journal Mir Perevoda (World of Translation).

The UTR organises and runs a number of training programmes, trade festivals, conferences, and workshops. The most prominent of these are the Summer and Winter Translation Schools
and The Structure and Content of Translator and Interpreter Training, an annual national conference on teaching methodology.

The UTR is a member of the International Federation of Translators (FIT) and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation where it represents the interests of TI professionals.

July 2020 saw the establishment of the Association of Translation Companies (ATC) on the basis of the Moscow Translation Club, which, since 2014, has been the main networking venue for leading language service providers in Russia. The ATC’s mission is to bring together language service providers for the purposes of representing the industry’s interests and working out common solutions, developing and promoting the industry, representing and protecting common professional and other interests of its members, as well as assisting its members in their professional efforts. The ATC’s leadership has announced that one of its first priorities will be joining the European Union of Associations of Translation Companies (EUATC), which would allow it to step up cooperation with foreign partners as well as represent Russia’s translation and interpreting industry internationally. That being said, this new organisation is still in its early stages and the impact it may have on the market remains to be seen.

The two aforementioned organisations (UTR and ATC) are independent groups. Membership is voluntary and is not a prerequisite for working in the field of TI or obtaining a licence to do so.

Market conditions and characteristics

Low earning potential of interpreting as a business

As a rule, large language service providers generate most of their revenue through translation. According to Translation Rating, a website dedicated to translation and interpretation market analysis, interpreting accounts for only about 13 per cent of the market, with the same ratio applying to the earnings of companies which provide both translation and interpretation services (Translation Rating). Providers that specialise in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting post significantly lower incomes than companies whose main business is translation. The largest providers of interpretation services are Ego Translating and Russkaya Perevodcheskaya Kompaniya (among specialised companies), and Janus Worldwide and Awatera (among generalist translation businesses). Some firms, such as Synchrotel, Metaphora, Sinkhrone Plus or Gelma, offer interpretation services as a supplement to conference equipment rental. On the whole, there are about 200 interpretation service providers in the Russian market (Translation Rating).

The majority of interpreting assignments in Russia are performed by freelancers, usually registered as individual entrepreneurs, who compete in a market where rates are determined by market conditions. Only the largest companies, enterprises, and banks which conduct a sizeable part of their business with foreign partners have in-house interpreters.

Volatility and seasonality

An important proportion of all consecutive and simultaneous interpreting in Russia happens during big international forums. Some of them, including the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, the St. Petersburg International Legal Forum, the Eastern Economic Forum, and the Russian Investment Forum (in Sochi), are annual events with a long history. Russia is also a traditional host of major international sports events, such as the 2014 Sochi Winter
Olympics or the 2018 FIFA World Cup. The number of interpreters supporting these gatherings depends on the number of working languages but often exceeds several dozen or even several hundred. For example, the Russia-Africa Summit, which took place in Sochi in October 2019, required 120 simultaneous interpreters.

The ability to convene international events and their attendance depend heavily on the international agenda as a whole and on Russia’s current state of relations with individual countries. The volume of bilateral trade and investment is also a crucial factor which determines the demand for interpretation since the private sector is the main consumer of interpretation services. These considerations explain the high volatility of the market, which is directly influenced by international developments.

A very prominent seasonality is another characteristic of the interpretation market in Russia, with the second half of December (Christmas holidays in western Christian countries) and the first part of January (New Year’s Eve and Orthodox Christmas in Russia), as well as the summer holiday period in July and August considered to be the slow seasons. As a result, most international events and meetings which require interpretation happen either from September to November or from February to June.

Reliance on local interpreters

A well-established network of higher education institutions completely satisfies the needs of the Russian interpretation market both in terms of the number of practitioners and their language combinations. All assignments for interpretation into and out of Russian are thus managed by Russia-based interpreters, which rules out the need to hire interpreters from elsewhere.

Gradual inclusion of languages of ex-Soviet republics

The Russian language was the lingua franca of the Soviet Union (with all residents of national republics being virtually bilingual), however, the number of Russian speakers among younger people in the post-Soviet states keeps going down. At the same time, political and economic ties between Russia and these countries remain very strong. This situation calls for interpreters with such language combinations as Russian-Georgian, Russian-Turkmen, Russian-Uzbek, etc., and they are likely to become even more relevant over time. Some specialised universities, such as Moscow State Linguistic University, have been quick to respond to this challenge with the launch of interpreting programmes based on the languages of the post-Soviet states.

Research in the field of conference interpreting

Although scholarly translation and interpreting-related research in Russia tends to focus on translation, there are some outstanding writings in the field of conference interpreting research as well. The key figure in this field is Ghelly Chernov, a former head of the Russian interpretation unit at the UN Headquarters in New York, professor at Moscow State Linguistic University, and prominent scholar. His pioneering research involved experiments, conducted in the late 1960s together with Zimnyaya, where performances by professional interpreters were recorded in order to analyse cognitive and linguistic aspects of their work (Zimnyaya & Chernov 1973).

Some of the best-known concepts introduced or reinforced by Chernov to the study of simultaneous interpretation are anticipation, inference, and redundancy (Chernov 1978, 2004). Chernov demonstrated that interpreters actively anticipate the incoming message rather than
only react to what they have heard and drew on information theory research to show that redundancy plays an important part in assuring the success of simultaneous interpretation (see also Hodzik & Williams, Chapter 26, in this volume).

A talented trainer of conference interpreters, Chernov underscored the importance of background knowledge and context (Chernov 1995). According to Chernov, the interpreter should be familiar with the communicative situation of any given interpretation assignment, and also have a thorough understanding of the speaker’s motives and background in order to be able to deliver a professional product. Chernov’s ideas about the nature of simultaneous interpretation, factors which determine its success, and approaches to training still play a key role in Russian-speaking countries.

Another prominent figure in the field of Russian interpretation research is Anatoly Shiryayev, a Russian-French interpreter, researcher, and interpreter trainer. His major work (Shiryayev 1979) is a comprehensive study of simultaneous interpretation drawing on experimental results and observations of practice, which can also serve as a thorough guide for instructors and is still relevant in the modern classroom.

Of particular interest is Shiryayev’s division of the process of simultaneous interpretation into three phases: (1) orientation (in the upcoming task) and choosing a solution; (2) performance; and (3) control. He introduces the concept of an ‘orientation unit’, which describes a unit of meaning that allows the interpreter to start looking for and choose a particular interpretation solution. Shiryayev also explores the correlation of continuous and discrete processes in simultaneous interpretation and classifies techniques for achieving compression.

Ryurik Minyar-Beloruchev, also an interpreter working with the Russian-French combination, belongs to the group of the ‘founding fathers’ of IS in Russia who researched theoretical and practical aspects of interpreting (see Minyar-Beloruchev 1980). He is probably best known for his in-depth exploration of consecutive interpretation, note-taking, and teaching methodology (Minyar-Beloruchev 1969), which became the foundation of Matyssek’s (1989) symbol-based note-taking system (see Ahrens & Orlando, Chapter 3, in this volume).

The doyen of Russian-German interpreting and interpretation studies is Mikhail Zwilling, whose earliest publications on interpretation appeared in the mid-1960s (e.g. Zwilling 1966). Zwilling is fondly remembered as a brilliant teacher and practising simultaneous interpreter whose career spanned seven decades, as well as a major scholar and lexicographer.

An important resource for Russian-speaking TIS scholars, as well as translators and interpreters, is Mosty (Bridges), a quarterly journal dedicated to the practice and theory of translation and interpretation. Since 2004, it has featured a number of articles on issues related to simultaneous interpretation and classifies techniques for achieving compression (in conjunction with the theme/rheme sentence structure), simplifying syntax, recreating high-register discourse in the target language with the help of original sample texts, etc.

Training opportunities

More than 50 higher education institutions in Russia have translation and interpreting programmes. Since joining the Bologna Process in 2003, Russia has developed a mix of older and newer degrees ranging from the 5-year specialist degree (roughly equivalent to bachelor’s + master’s, a holdover from the previous era) to 4-year bachelor’s and 2-year master’s programs, to PhDs and advanced doctoral programmes largely following the patterns established in the Soviet times. Unlike in some other countries, Russian higher education institutions offer specialised translator/interpreter training at the bachelor’s level, as well as at higher levels.
Despite there being a high number of universities with interpreting programmes, only four of them have schools (faculties) specifically dedicated to translator and interpreter training—Moscow State Linguistic University and Nizhny Novgorod State Linguistic University (civilian), as well as the Military University of the Ministry of Defence and the FSB Academy (military and security services). Other universities either run translation and interpreting training programmes as part of their language schools (where they also educate philologists and teachers) or have departments (chairs) with professors of translation and interpreting operating within schools dedicated to other areas (such as engineering and technology).

Most Russian universities (around 70 per cent) are state-owned, and around 50 per cent of all students receive free government-funded instruction. Due to the prevalence of state-run budget-funded education, universities on the whole do not have to compete with each other for applicants’ money, and the selection of programmes available to students does not follow market trends as closely as in countries with mostly private colleges. As a result, the number of students who receive translation and interpretation training in Russia appears to exceed market needs, with many students viewing this area of study as a general opportunity to master foreign languages rather than necessarily a pathway to a career in the field of translation and interpretation.

Traditionally, interpreter education in Russia embraces a holistic approach where students were trained to be generalists. Moreover, translation and interpretation, at least at the bachelor’s and specialist’s levels, tend to be taught together as part of an obligatory package. Community interpreting has not yet gained traction as a career or a separate degree track, so the majority of students admitted to TI programmes in Russia can be viewed, to some degree, as potential conference interpreters, at least as far as consecutive interpretation is concerned. Simultaneous interpretation is mostly taught at the master’s level or as supplemental training programmes or courses and is a much narrower field than consecutive.

The quality of bachelor’s, master’s, and specialist’s programmes varies greatly across Russian regions. Universities and institutes best known for excellence in translation and interpreting training include Moscow State Linguistic University (formerly the Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Languages), Lomonosov Moscow State University, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia—SCIT (St. Petersburg), and Nizhny Novgorod State Linguistic University. The first four of these have signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations on cooperation in the training of language professionals. The Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia—SCIT is also a member of the European Masters in Conference interpreting (EMCI) network.

Apart from state-run (and some private) colleges, short interpreter training courses are offered regularly by a number of organisations, mainly language service providers with a training arm or public associations of translators and interpreters.

**Sign language conference interpreting**

Russian Sign Language (RSL) is traditionally classified as part of the French Sign Language family together with American Sign Language and Irish Sign Language (see Turner, Grbić, Stone, Tester & de Wit, Chapter 38, in this volume).

Different sources cite different numbers of RSL speakers. Voskresensky (2002) believes this figure to be close to 2 million people. However, the 2010 Russian national census, the first one to officially record speakers of RSL, only counted 120,500 people. RSL is also used by the hearing-impaired in ex-Soviet republics (except the Baltic states), Bulgaria, and Israel. Therefore, even though the official statistic is low, the number of RSL users must be considerable, which signals the need for an adequate supply of RSL interpreters.
In 2012, the federal law *On the Social Protection of Disabled People in the Russian Federation* was amended, resulting in a change of status for RSL from “a means of interpersonal communication” to “a language of communication in cases of hearing and/or speech impairment used in spheres including those when the spoken form of a state language of the Russian Federation is used”. The law also introduced a system of subtitling or sign language interpretation of television programmes and films and stipulated that Russian sign language interpreting was to be performed by interpreters with appropriate training and qualifications. The procedure for providing RSL interpreting services was to be determined by the Russian government. All of that meant that the education of RSL interpreters received government backing.

According to the All-Russian Society for the Deaf, highly trained RSL interpreters are in short supply. While there were 5,500 sign language interpreters in the country at the time of the collapse of the USSR, around 1,000 of them remain in Russia today (All-Russian Society for the Deaf, 2020). Simultaneous RSL interpretation of official political speeches and news programmes is not obligatory and is only performed in some instances. Professional training programmes for sign language interpreters exist at the Central Research and Development Institute of Russian Sign Language, Novosibirsk State Technical University, and Moscow State Linguistic University. Supplementing them are a number of smaller training centres, the oldest and most respected of which is the G. Zaitseva Centre for Deaf Education and Sign Language in Moscow. The status of the sign language interpreter’s profession in Russia is gradually improving, however, their rates remain lower than those in the market of spoken language interpretation.

**Influence of English**

Russia has traditionally pursued independent linguistic policies, and the Russian language, its traditions and versatility remain at the core of national identity. That said, the global impact of English is felt in a variety of ways, from an influx of English borrowings and calques to a sharp increase in the number of younger people who speak enough English to manage without interpreters.

The prevalence of English in international business practices also means that event organisers often limit interpretation services to an English-Russian booth. However, the biggest international conferences and forums held in Russia usually provide Russian-Spanish, Russian-French, Russian-Chinese, Russian-Arabic, and some other booths, as well as a Russian-English booth. At the same time, interpretation into and out of Russian is used by the country’s top officials in diplomatic settings as a matter of principle, as well as convenience.

**References**


