The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting

Michaela Albl-Mikasa, Elisabet Tiselius

Conference interpreting in South Korea

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429297878-17
Jieun Lee
Published online on: 30 Nov 2021

How to cite :- Jieun Lee. 30 Nov 2021, Conference interpreting in South Korea from: The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting Routledge
Accessed on: 19 Jul 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429297878-17

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Conference interpreting in South Korea

Brief history

Little is known about the state of conference interpreting in South Korea prior to the commencement of formal training for conference interpreters in the 1980s. According to Kim (1973: 72), who later authored the first Korean PhD thesis on the theory and practice of simultaneous interpreting, six or seven untrained interpreters offered English–Korean simultaneous interpreting at international conferences and seminars occasionally held in Seoul during the 1960s. There were also French and Japanese interpreters who worked at international events during the 1970s. These early conference interpreters were often bilingual men, who had other professions and sporadically engaged in conference interpreting.

During the 1980s, the demand for conference interpreting increased with growing international trade and international exchanges along with the development of the South Korean economy (Choi & Lim 2002: 629). The newly established graduate programme for interpreting and translation training in Hankuk University of Foreign Studies began to produce conference interpreters in South Korea. English and Japanese were the main languages in demand at the time, followed by Spanish, French, Chinese and Russian. The language direction of conference interpreting was primarily from other languages into Korean (Yeom 2018).

During the 1990s, information technology became a major domain in conference interpreting, and interpreting for government and private sector projects, which was referred to as ‘project interpreting’ in Korean, boomed as the government embarked on major infrastructure projects for the construction of high-speed railways and Incheon International Airport, and companies undertook business management and restructuring projects with foreign consultants. Meanwhile, in the wake of diplomatic normalisation with China in 1992, Chinese became a third major language in the conference interpreting market after English and Japanese. Live satellite news coverage of the 1991 Gulf War sparked interest in simultaneous interpreting among the general public (Choi & Lim 2002: 633; Kwak 2008: 2). The novelty of televised simultaneous interpreting caught the attention of ordinary citizens and conference interpreting has become better known as simultaneous interpreting since then. In these various ways, conference interpreting became recognised as a highly paid job, which has attracted many talented people, particularly young women seeking professional careers. Many conference interpreters
consider the 1990s as the heyday of conference interpreting in South Korea due to the professional recognition and remuneration relative to other professions. It remains a popular profession especially for young women with linguistic talents because conference interpreters have caught the media’s attention as communication experts at international conferences and high-profile summits over the years.1

With the enactment of the Korean sign language law in 2016, sign language has been recognised as a national language and sign language interpreting services during TV news have become common as broadcasting companies are now required to offer sign language interpreting for at least 5 per cent of their broadcasting content. Apart from simultaneous media interpreting, however, there is no conference sign language market in South Korea. Therefore, this chapter focuses on spoken language conference interpreting.

Current state of the industry and the job market

It is difficult to gauge the size of the conference interpreting industry, including how many agencies and interpreters are engaged in the business of conference interpreting because there are no available statistical data on the industry. If we can roughly assess the growth and development of the industry from the number of international conferences hosted in South Korea, there were 32 international conferences hosted in 1991, and the number of international conferences rose to 347 in 2009 (Kang 2015: 121), then to 1,297 in 2017.2 Given that the statistical data only considered a minimum of three-day conferences, attended by more than 300 delegates from more than five nations, with at least 40 per cent international delegates (Kang 2015: 120), the actual number of international conferences in which conference interpreting services were provided must be higher. The data indicate that the industry has grown substantially over the past three decades. At the same time, the industry has been affected by regional political developments, including continuing tensions with North Korea over its nuclear weapons programme and the strained relationship with China and Japan, which have curtailed conference activity in specific language markets.

English is the number one language in demand, while Chinese and Japanese are the other two major languages used in conference interpreting in South Korea (see also Dawrant, Wang & Jiang, Chapter 15, and Takeda & Matsushita, Chapter 12, in this volume). Although there are no statistical figures for each language market, if the job postings at a major translation and interpreting (T&I) agency can serve as an indicator, English accounted for 42 per cent of all job postings in 2015, while Chinese accounted for 15.4 per cent, Japanese for 14.5 per cent, and a combination of German, Russian, French, Spanish and Arabic accounted for 15.1 per cent (Yu 2016: 60). Interpreting into the B language is common and widely practised in South Korea, with interpreting from Korean into other languages accounting for more than half of the workload of interpreting practitioners (Choi 2006: 9; Lee 2017b: 97).

In terms of average annual income, freelance interpreters tend to earn more than staff interpreters working in various organisations, including government ministries and agencies to private companies (Lee 2017b: 95). The income earned by interpreters varies according to the length of work experience, the languages and the sectors in which they are engaged (Lee 2017b: 96): Those with longer years of experience and English interpreters tend to earn higher income than other language interpreters. On average, those working as staff interpreters in the private sector tend to make more money than those in the public sector including government organisations (Lee 2017a, 2017b).

Global business, trade and international cooperation are an important part of the everyday business of many organisations and institutions, so many staff interpreters work in diverse
organisations in the public and private sectors (Lee 2017b; Lee et al. 2014). Most of them are engaged in translation work more often than interpreting work in terms of their job duties (Lee 2017a; 2017b). The majority of staff interpreters are English interpreters because it is the language in highest demand (Lee 2017b; Lee et al. 2014). Due to the stable demand for staff interpreters, the majority of newly trained conference interpreters tend to begin their careers as staff interpreters and choose to freelance after gaining work experience. However, the working conditions of staff interpreters have remained unchanged or deteriorated in real terms over the past decade (Lee 2017a). The employment status and terms of contracts have become more complicated, partly because of complex labour laws and regulations (see Im & Lim 2020 for their perceived professional status in comparison with Dam and Zethsen’s (2013) survey results; see also Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume). This trend has had a negative impact on the job security and pay for staff interpreters, which has led many to leave in-house employment. As more interpreters have entered the freelance market and have often engaged in price-cutting competition, working conditions in the freelance conference interpreting market have been under increasing threat.

Further, the economic downturn and oversupply of interpreters from numerous training programmes have created a competitive market for conference interpreters in recent years (Lee 2017a: 429). The situation has been aggravated partly due to a lack of a professional association of conference interpreters and a lack of awareness regarding long-term implications for the profession. 3

Finally, while few interpreting agencies existed during the late 1980s, agencies have since taken control of the market and evolved into conference organisers during the 2000s (Yeom 2018). Accompanied by the development of the meeting, incentive trips, convention, and exhibition (MICE) industry in recent years, professional convention organisers (PCOs) have started to play a major role in the international conference interpreting industry because they work closely with interpreting and translation service agencies.

Conference interpreter education

When Hankuk University of Foreign Studies first established the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation in 1979, there were no professionally trained interpreters to teach graduate students and the teaching faculty consisted of professors of language and literature. Conference interpreter training began in earnest when overseas trained interpreters and graduates joined the faculties during the late 1980s (Choi & Lim 2002: 632–633; Kim et al. 2014: 322). By the time Ewha Womans University launched the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation in 1997, the faculty consisted of professionally trained practising interpreters. Over the years, the number of two-year graduate programmes that included conference interpreter education increased to 12, 6 of which are in Seoul.

Reflecting market demand for conference interpreting in South Korea, English, Chinese and Japanese are the major language streams offered in graduate T&I programmes, whereas Russian, French, Arabic, German, and Spanish are only offered in one or two graduate programmes. In some graduate schools, students who want to add a third working language can opt for a third year to train in a C language.

Competitive entrance examinations demonstrate the attractiveness of the profession of conference interpreting. Although the competition rate for admission is not as high as it used to be, 4 hundreds of applicants apply to prestigious graduate schools to study conference interpreting every year. Many applicants who fail on the first attempt continue to sit the entrance examinations multiple times.
Each graduate programme is different; translation and interpreting majors may take different curriculum pathways from the point of entrance examination or they may study both translation and interpreting and then choose their major or specialty later (Choi 2006; Lee et al. 2014). Conference interpreter education largely focuses on the development of interpreting skills, often in combination with translation and language skills. Practical skills development is emphasised in the curriculum, whereas training related to theory and research is considered peripheral. Despite the introduction of some courses related to technology, such as computer-assisted-translation (CAT) classes, the core component of Master’s-level training is a concentration on the acquisition of professional interpreting and translation skills (see also Kalina & Barranco-Droege, Chapter 24, in this volume). Consecutive interpreting skills are fundamental to interpreting competence, so consecutive interpreting training precedes simultaneous interpreting training, which is generally reserved for second year training in conference interpreting and is not offered to translation majors.

Most graduate programmes have their own graduation examinations, which require demonstration of a certain level of interpreting skills (and translation skills depending on the curriculum) and an optional Master’s dissertation. As such, a Master’s degree with a simultaneous interpreting training component has been considered to be the credential for conference interpreters. However, there is no common entry standard for the conference interpreting market and different training institutions do not uphold similar standards for interpreting quality.

Without exception, English as a lingua franca (ELF; see Albl-Mikasa, Chapter 39, in this volume) has affected conference interpreting in South Korea, which has educational implications. A growing number of non-native English speakers communicate in English in various conference interpreting settings. Even when they do not speak in English, they may use English in their presentation slides, which creates an additional language burden for non-English interpreters. In turn, this raises a need to enhance the English skills of non-English interpreting students through curriculum changes (Choi 2006). English–Korean conference interpreters are directly affected by ELF speakers. Studies have confirmed the difficulties experienced by English–Korean interpreters in dealing with phonological and syntactic features of non-native speakers and the negative effects on the accuracy of interpreting (e.g. Huh 2013; Lee 2018). To address such challenges in ELF communication and promote effective interpreter-mediated communication, the cooperation of event organisers is essential, including the provision of preparation materials and pre-meetings with speakers (Huh 2018; Lee 2018). These findings alert interpreter trainers to prepare students to interpret for ELF speakers (Huh 2013, 2014).

With a view to training competent professionals who are capable of dealing with diversified needs in the rapidly changing market, there have been calls to reinforce the professionalism of interpreting trainees and to develop their capabilities not only for T&I work as conveyors of messages but also as producers of messages in specific domains, including international law, international trade, and international conference planning (Choi 2006; Yu 2016). In recognition of the need for specialisation in practice, some have suggested that interpreting students double major in law, economics, and communication (e.g. Kim et al. 2014). There is a growing awareness that training institutions need to proactively research future job profiles and market demand for conference interpreting because the Fourth Industrial Revolution poses a threat to the job security of many professionals, including interpreters and translators (Im 2020: 166). To stay competitive in competition against artificial intelligence, interpreters need to add human values that go beyond merely performing interpreting tasks. Accordingly, interpreter training should focus on building strong communicative competence, interpersonal competence and professional ethics in addition to the professional knowledge and skills required for conference interpreting and interpretation.
interpreting (Im 2020: 166). This is an area for which research is expected to offer insights into innovative approaches that can produce the best training outcomes, including how interpreters can be empowered by artificial intelligence.

The development of information communication technology (ICT) affected the working and training environments for interpreters even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Fantinuoli, Chapter 36, in this volume). Trainees and trainers need to welcome non-conventional modes of teaching and learn to reap the benefits of computer-assisted training tools and to optimise learning experiences (Jin 2019; Lee 2016). For example, to cope with remote interpreting, which has gained momentum on the strength of ICT development, training needs to prepare interpreters to effectively work at teleconferences or videoconferences (Lee 2019). Interpreting trainer researchers have considered how to design computer-assisted interpreter training programmes that draw on educational technology (Jin 2017) and use learning management systems (Lee et al. 2015; Lee & Huh 2018; Yang 2012; Yang & Song 2012), social media (Lee & Huh 2015) and apps (Lee et al. 2018) to enhance the learning experiences of interpreting trainees.

Conference interpreting research

The establishment of doctoral programmes in interpreting and translation studies and academic societies during the late 1990s heralded the development of interpreting research in South Korea. Seven peer-reviewed journals are published by T&I academic associations, including *Journal of Translation Studies, Interpretation and Translating*, and *FORUM* or graduate school-affiliated research institutes, including *T&I Review* and *TransLinguaTech*. Further, there are other foreign language linguistics and language education periodicals that publish interpreting research work. Translation research articles published in Korean journals far outnumber interpreting research articles, with interpreting studies papers accounting for fewer than 30 per cent of articles published in the three Korean translation studies journals (Won 2015: 44). This may be a reflection of the smaller proportion of interpreting researchers vis-à-vis translation researchers and of the pragmatic and ethical challenges to access the interpreting data for research purposes.

At the time of writing, across the Korean training institutions, there were approximately 20 PhD theses that addressed conference interpreting and its education. The research topics ranged from interpreting theory to empirical research on different modes of interpreting, interpreting quality and assessment and pedagogy. A meta-analysis of research trends in Korean interpreting studies revealed five major research paradigms: namely the interpretive theory of translation paradigm, the cognitive processing paradigm, the target-text oriented paradigm, the educational paradigm, and the socio-professional paradigm (Won 2015). According to Won (2015), there was a paradigm shift in interpreting research during the mid-2000s, which saw the decline of interpretive theory and target-text-oriented paradigms and the emergence of the discourse analysis paradigm, influenced by the increasing need for community interpreting for migrants and international visitors. Won suggested that the neurological paradigm and the philosophical speculative paradigm were also promising research paradigms as researchers explored more innovative research methods and expanded the scope of interpreting research subjects. Most interpreting researchers are involved in interpreter training, so pedagogical perspectives are often incorporated in their research work.

Professional association

In addition to industry-wide, standardised public recognition of professional status, such as certification, professional monopolies over specific types of work, professional education,
remuneration reflecting professional standing, and possession of a distinctive knowledge base, professional organisation and codified ethical standards are considered to be tokens of professional status (Dam 2017: 236; see also Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume). However, when it comes to conference interpreting in South Korea, some of these conditions are not met, which undermines the status of the profession.

The Korean Association of Translators and Interpreters (KATI), which was inaugurated in 2008, is the only professional association of interpreters and translators in South Korea. There are approximately ten Korean AIIC members, although only a handful are based in South Korea. Generally, practitioners are not keen to attain AIIC membership because it does not make a difference to work in the Korean market (please refer to other chapters in this volume on Japan, China and India). KATI initially recruited its members from professionally trained interpreters and translators. It has recently expanded its membership to include agencies and students who are majoring in T&I. However, KATI does not represent a large number of practitioners. The full fee-paying membership stands at 160 and associate membership at 133 as of December 2019. It is impossible to determine how many conference interpreters belong to this association because the membership does not distinguish conference interpreters from other practitioners, such as translators and translation agencies, although many interpreters also practise translation.

The stated aim of KATI is to promote networking among interpreters and translators and to protect their rights, while seeking to improve the quality of professional service. Given that any well-established profession has a code of ethics and professional conduct, which is shared and is enforceable by its members (Dam 2017: 236), the lack of ethical practice guidelines for KATI members indicates that it is still in its early developmental stage as a professional association. Its development deserves urgent attention because a solid consensus on good practice or ethical practice may further enhance professional service quality and collegial solidarity within the profession.

Professional status and job satisfaction

Although conference interpreters’ professional status and job satisfaction are relatively high (Choi 2008; Dam & Zethsen 2013; Lee 2017a), interpreters have mixed views about their status because their professional work is not always recognised as such. In the early 2000s, Choi and Lim (2002: 633–634) argued that, despite a high level of remuneration, the social acceptance and status of conference interpreters were poor, which resulted in a low retention of practitioners in the profession. Recent research findings have suggested that conference interpreters still feel that their work is not valued and is often misunderstood (Huh 2018; Lee 2017a; 2017b; Park 2016). Despite more than 40 years’ history of conference interpreting in South Korea, a lack of understanding about the interpreting process and the role of conference interpreters continues to haunt them at work. Complaints by service users regarding interpreting service quality are often attributed to their lack of understanding about interpreting work and lack of cooperation to ensure interpreting quality (Park 2016).

Media coverage of conference interpreters can serve to raise the general public’s understanding of the profession and can have a positive impact on the profession. However, Huh’s (2016) analysis of media articles containing the term ‘simultaneous interpreting’ revealed that the Korean media have a tendency to perpetuate and propagate misunderstanding about the profession. Further, the media do not necessarily enhance the professional profile of interpreters by concentrating on the peripheral aspects of professional interpreting or interpreters, such as appearance or relationships with celebrities. Additionally, the Korean media often misuse
the term, ‘simultaneous interpreting’ to simply describe one’s foreign language proficiency to engage in conversation or basic information service for the general public, which is not the same as interpreting (Huh 2016). In addition, although some interpreters’ social media activities to publicise their work may boost the image of professional interpreters, they may also blur the professional identity of conference interpreters because their professional service is not limited to interpreting as they also work as English emcees and occasionally challenge the professional ethics of interpreting through controversial posts, which do not align with professional interpreter ethics (e.g. Best 2019).

The market situation and working conditions affect job satisfaction and job prospects for Korean interpreters. A recent survey of conference interpreters revealed that employment status—freelance or staff interpreter—and the length of career were linked to the level of job satisfaction (Lee 2017a, 2017b). The overall job satisfaction of freelance interpreters was higher than staff interpreters, who were more pessimistic regarding their job prospects than freelance interpreters, which may reflect the fact that staff interpreters’ working conditions have not improved much over the years (Lee 2017b: 100). Moreover, the relatively low score in the category of social recognition demonstrates lower perception of their professional status and recognition by staff interpreters (Lee 2017a: 99–100, 2017b: 99). While both groups of conference interpreters were highly satisfied with aspects of their jobs, such as gender equality and the professional competence, they were least satisfied with respect to job security and future prospects (Lee 2017a). Further, recent graduates’ lower job satisfaction levels and negative views of job prospects suggested that prospects for the industry are becoming more challenging (Lee 2017a: 444). The current state of the profession surveyed from the perspectives of interpreters suggests a need for more effective education and networking to promote professional status and standards.

The conference interpreting profession, despite some future uncertainties commonly facing other professions, remains as an attractive career option for those with fluent linguistic skills and is likely to evolve into a more value-added profession aided by technological advances in the coming decades.

Notes
1 Numerous professional interpreters have been interviewed by the media (e.g. Jang 2000; Kim 2006; Park 2010). Following the Trump–Kim summit in 2018, the U.S. State Department interpreter, Dr. Yun-hyang Lee, attracted widespread media attention (e.g. Kang 2018; Meixler 2018).
3 There are occasional seasonal shortages of Korean-English conference interpreters, although there is a consensus that the increased number of graduate T&I programmes has resulted in the oversupply of interpreters in the market, including ones with dubious competence and a weak sense of professional ethics. Further, some agencies affiliated with training institutions have flouted standard practice in the market by charging a zero fee as a loyalty bonus or offering almost free student interpreting services to remain competitive in the market. Unfortunately, the market often fails to winnow out incompetent interpreters because of their price competitiveness and the provision of ancillary services, which are considered outside the role of conference interpreters.
4 The competition rates for entrance examinations hovered over 10:1, but fell to below 10 over the past decade.
5 During the past decade or so, while numerous undergraduate programmes have incorporated T&I training in language studies, only a few undergraduate programmes have been dedicated to T&I studies. However, undergraduate programmes are not considered to be professional training for conference interpreters.
6 These figures were provided by the KATI Secretary General in December 2019. Available at: www.i-kati.or.kr/en/about/KATI.asp.
Further reading


References


Dam, Helle V. & Zethsen, Krean Korning 2013. Conference interpreters—the stars of the translation profession? A study of occupational status of Danish EU interpreters as compared to Danish EU translators as a case in point. Interpreting 15 (2), 229–259.


Conference interpreting in South Korea


Kang, Su Jung 2015. Thongpenyeksanepuy sicangkwucowa thukcingey kwanhan yenkwu [Study of market structure and characteristics of the industry of interpretation and translation]. *Interpretation and Translation* 17 (2), 113–133.


Lee, Migyong 2019. Wenkyekthongyek hwalsenghwa yoken mich thongyekkyoyuky u hamuy [Prerequisites for successful communication with remote interpreting and pedagogical considerations for training]. *The Journal of Interpretation and Translation Education* 17 (2), 63–84.


Park, Ji-young 2016. Thongyek sayongoaey uyhan thongyekphwumcilphengka- phwumcilpocung kwancemuy thongyek sepisu siphyay salyey pwunsek [Interpreting quality assessment from quality assurance perspective]. *Interpretation and Translation* (Special Issue) 18, 57–79.


Yeom, Hehi 2018. Special lecture on the overview of the Korean conference interpreting industry, Ewha Womans University Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation, 21 December 2018.