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Conference interpreting in Sub-Saharan Africa

Kim Wallmach and Nina Okagbue

Introduction

In this chapter, we begin by examining the roots of interpreting in Africa before reviewing the sociolinguistic reality on the continent as the context for a discussion of conference interpreting in Sub-Saharan Africa. Institutional entities and professional associations from the Maghreb and Mashreq regions have not been covered here owing to space constraints. We provide an overview of the various organisations which have recourse to interpreting services. This forms the backdrop for a discussion of current training practices in the region. Thereafter, a discussion of the dynamics between African conference interpreters and their diverse audience categories creates space for a broader discussion of research in the region, touching on aspects such as the geopolitics of conference interpreting, the effect of institutional contexts on the interpreting process and the question of directionality, as well as research into interpreter training and new technologies.

Roots and historical developments

The practice of interpreting in Africa has its beginnings in the oral traditions that have been essential modes of social dialogue in African societies for thousands of years. The professional linguist—known as a griot (“bard”) in francophone Africa (Bandia 2009) or as an imbongi or traditional praise singer in Southern Africa (Kaschula 1999), for example—belonged to a long line of gifted orators and tribal historians who acted as intermediaries between the king and his populace, since the king’s elevated position prevented him from addressing his people directly (Tarr 2017). Professional linguists often enjoyed a privileged position in society and wielded a great deal of political power. Their interventions took many forms, from devising praise songs and ‘praise names’ to celebrate the victories and glorious qualities of the chief and his ancestors, and respeaking the king’s words in more accessible or more poetic forms (intralingual interpreting), to interpreting into other languages (Wallmach 2015a).

In pre-colonial East and West Africa, commerce with the Persian and Arab world was documented as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, involving locals who acted as intermediaries and interpreters for traders, diplomats and travellers. Later, during the fifteenth
century, the Portuguese established trading posts on the coasts of Algeria and South Africa (Pakenham 1991).

The colonial period, dating from the mid-1800s, saw the rise of the explorers, evangelists and their interpreters. Explorers such as David Livingstone called in 1857 for a worldwide crusade to open up Africa’s interior to ‘commerce and Christianity’. The ‘Scramble for Africa’ had begun (Pakenham 1991). There were hardly any exploratory expeditions into the African hinterland that did not include interpreters, some of whom no doubt saved their leaders from disaster, and others whose linguistic skills were doubtful in the extreme (Wallmach 2015a). Interpreters were increasingly needed not only to facilitate trade and exploration, but also to assist in treaty negotiations. With colonial occupation, African interpreters became crucial intermediaries in the inevitable armed conflicts that ensued, as well as indispensable functionaries in courtrooms, district offices and clinics. Within half a generation, Europe’s presence was felt in 90 per cent of the African continent, with six nations in particular—France, Britain, Portugal, Germany, Italy and Belgium—changing Africa’s linguistic landscape forever (Heath 2010).

The assistance of interpreters (and translators) with evangelisation efforts by European and American missionaries during the colonial period also helped to shape the continent’s linguistic profile. Many languages were committed to writing for the first time, in a haphazard process where some languages were selected over others, and some mutually intelligible dialects were elevated to the status of separate languages in accordance with the varying spheres of influence of competing missions from various countries or in line with colonial borders (Pennycook 2005). These codified languages were often later seen as sufficiently standardised to be taught in schools, and/or raised to official status.

Country-specific features, main languages and language pairs

Africa is a continent with a diversity of over 2,000 indigenous languages, by some accounts (Heine & Nurse 2000). Other researchers, most notably Kwesi Prah (1995), maintain that there are no more than 15 ‘core’ languages in use on the continent. Four main language groupings have been identified and classified in Africa, namely, Niger-Congo (which includes the Bantu group of languages), Nilo-Saharan, Afroasiatic, and Khoisan (Beck 2018). Many of the languages spoken in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa are closely related, forming part of the Niger-Congo group (Fardon & Furniss 1994: 11), which goes some way towards explaining why Africans in these regions are able to understand each other relatively easily. Most Africans are bilingual or multilingual, using mother tongues in the home and at school, with official languages introduced early on as part of formal learning. Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language, in accordance with the widely held perception that the international languages of wider communication (Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish) are the only means for upward economic mobility (cf. Kamwangamalu 2016; Kanana 2013).

Some countries, such as Tanzania (Kiswahili), Ethiopia (Amharic), and Somalia (Somali) opted to develop their indigenous linguae franca for use in education, trade and commerce. Swahili as a lingua franca, compulsory in schools and also taught as a university subject in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, has become an official instrument for linguistic unity that transcends the colonial boundaries of francophone countries (such as the Democratic Republic of Congo), anglophone countries (e.g. Uganda) and lusophone countries (such as Mozambique).

Arabic is also an important lingua franca in Sub-Saharan Africa. Its use as a language of state correspondence in West Africa dates back to the eleventh century, and by the seventeenth century, it had established itself as the language of learning (Hunwick 1964). In 1945, the League of
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Arab States (later known as the Arab League) grouped together all countries in which Arabic is a spoken language of the majority of the population (Rauch & Kostyshak 2009). From the 1970s onwards, the Arab League included five Sub-Saharan African countries, namely, the Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia and Sudan. Arabic is recognised as an official language alongside French in Chad, Djibouti, Mauritania and the Comoros, and together with English in Sudan. Eritrea chose to promote local languages together with Arabic, the main language of commerce (Woldemikael 2003). Although declared official in Chad from 1978, Arabic was not adopted until 1996 through a constitutional referendum fraught with debate over its role in fostering national unity and democracy. The lack of a clear national language policy has resulted in a great deal of linguistic variation, termed ‘Chadian Arabic’ (Alio 1988).

The move to promote ‘living’ indigenous languages over the ‘imported’ languages of former colonial rulers soon gathered momentum as more countries became independent. The manifesto of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) on the language question, adopted in 1986, had aimed to progressively replace the ‘imported’ languages of former colonial rule with African languages (Alexander 2009: 118). However, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), officially institutionalised in 2006 as a special office of the African Union (AU), held a much more pragmatic view. ACALAN recognised the need to further develop, popularise and enhance the use of African languages while at the same time acknowledging the necessity for African languages and the languages imposed on African communities in the colonial period to co-exist (Alexander 2009: 118). While the use of colonial European languages such as English, French and Portuguese had been useful for enabling the participation of educated Africans in continental and global dialogue, millions of Africans did not speak or understand those languages, whereas promoting African languages was seen as empowering Africans at every level (Djité 2008).

The conference interpreter, often untrained, but working in institutional or freelance settings, appeared on the African continent post-independence, between the 1950s and 1970s. In the next section, we provide an overview of the various organisations which began to request their services as a backdrop for a discussion of training practices and training needs on the continent as well as conference interpreting research.

Conference interpreting settings

Our discussion of various conference interpreting settings focuses on institutions with recourse to conference interpretation at pan-African, regional and national levels. It is noteworthy that, despite ACALAN’s ideals, the working languages of many of these institutions still provide little to no institutional scope for the use of indigenous African languages.

Pan-African institutional entities with recourse to interpretation

The OAU, established in Ethiopia in 1963 by 37 independent and sovereign states, was the institutional incarnation on the continent of the tradition of Pan Africanism (Mathews 1977). It was also the administrative setting for recruiting qualified staff and freelance interpreters from all over Africa, who contributed their language skills—primarily in Arabic, English and French—during the momentous conferences following the heady days of independence in the 1960s. In 2001, the OAU was replaced by the AU, now a continental organization of 55 member states with its Commission headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The official languages of the Union and all its institutions are Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili and any other African language. The main languages of interpretation, however, remained Arabic,
English and French, provided by staff and freelance interpreters mostly trained at institutions abroad. The same recruitment principles remained in force until a new crop of interpreters trained on the continent became available.

Through the creation of its African Economic Community (AEC) in 1991, the OAU laid down the institutional framework for the integration of African economies. AEC Treaty institutions such as the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) and the Court of Justice provide regular work for English and French freelance interpreters, joined more recently by Portuguese interpreters on staff at the Parliament. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission (UNEA), the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON), the WHO Regional Office for Africa (WHO AFRO) and the other United Nations institutional entities provide simultaneous interpretation from and into the UN’s official working languages for meetings on the continent.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) is made up of 53 regional member countries and 24 non-regional member countries and uses the official working languages of English and French, with Arabic and Portuguese also being used on occasion. The Bank’s flagship knowledge product on macroeconomic development and infrastructure—the *African Economic Outlook*—published annually in English, French and Portuguese—also provides highlights in several of the most widely read and spoken languages in Africa, from Hausa to Zulu (AfDB 2020). Given the volume of meetings, the AfDB serves as the largest hub in West Africa for the recruitment of freelance interpreters.

Several pan-African bodies have been set up under the impetus of the African Development Bank. The African Export-Import Bank (AFREXIMBANK) serves its shareholders in English, French, Arabic and Portuguese, and general assemblies of institutions for economic and social development, such as the Association of African Development Finance Institutions (AADFI), use English and French as official working languages. Other regional financial institutions, such as the Central Bank of West African States in Dakar, Senegal, where the working language is French, regularly call on freelance interpreters and translators using both English and French to serve the West African Monetary Union and its regional partners.

**Regional institutional entities with recourse to interpretation**

The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) has 21 member countries, and uses English, French and Portuguese as working languages. COMESA is on the same institutional footing within the African Economic Community as the other Regional Economic Communities (RECs) reporting to the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government. Viewed as the ‘building blocks’ of the AU, the other RECs are the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). All eight RECs use professional interpretation and translation in Arabic, English, French and Portuguese to facilitate regional economic trade. Standard recruitment methods are used to select qualified and experienced interpreters from the continent.

**National institutions with recourse to interpreting**

A number of African countries make use of parliamentary interpreting to facilitate communication, including Ethiopia, Senegal, Botswana and South Africa. In Rwanda, bills must be made available to MPs in all three official languages (Kinyarwanda, English and French). In Senegal, parliamentary interpreters were trained to offer six local languages in combination with French,
but, in practice, MPs currently have access only to Wolof and French. In Cameroon, the failure to provide parliamentary interpreting in languages other than English and French might explain why MPs who double as traditional leaders and alternates are not active in parliament (Gandu 2018). In South Africa, the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996–1998) marked the first time that indigenous South African languages had been used in the simultaneous mode, and offered an opportunity for many South Africans to become acquainted with the marvels of simultaneous interpreting (cf. Du Plessis & Wiegand 1998; Wallmach 2002, 2015b). Since then, all of the provincial legislatures and metropolitan councils in South Africa require interpreters for the regional official languages in addition to South African Sign Language (SASL) where needed. The national parliament uses English as its pivot language and provides interpretation into and from all eleven official languages, namely Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, siSwati, isiNdebele, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, as well as SASL. Interpreters hold qualifications ranging from a BA (Language Practice) to an MA in Interpreting.

Nowadays, national and international conferences on the continent also offer freelance opportunities for interpreters, mainly in languages such as English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, but also Arabic, Mandarin Chinese and Russian on occasion, as well as in many local languages. It is worth mentioning, however, that for conferences run by organisations based outside Africa that take place in Africa, interpreters are still very often recruited from Europe and flown in to interpret, and not only because their language combination cannot be found on site.

**Sign language interpreting**

Signed languages are widely used on the African continent (Kiyaga & Moores 2003), but in general, most African signed languages are not standardised, and lack of interpreter training opportunities and small budgets mean that there are few opportunities for conference interpreting with signed languages, with the notable exception of South Africa. African countries represent fully a third of the current 66 national members of the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI 2015), established in 2003. The African Federation of Sign Language Interpreters (AFSLI) has been established in response to concerns about the quality of signing in the continent, and numbers almost 100 members (PAMCIT 2018).

Signed language interpreting is used daily during televised newscasts in South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Rwanda and Algeria (Kaula 2014; Odada 2018), among others. This has assisted considerably with the development and promotion of signed languages on the continent. Du Toit (2017) reports on the specific strategies used by professional South African Sign Language interpreters on national television to mitigate their cognitive load and deliver a target discourse that meets production and expectancy norms. Wehrmeyer (2013) investigates factors hampering comprehension of sign language interpretations rendered on South African TV news bulletins in light of Deaf viewers’ expectancy norms and corpus analyses of authentic interpretations.

SASL conference interpreters also work regularly in the South African national parliament, provincial legislatures, municipal councils and at many conferences and seminars across the country. Their Kenyan counterparts also interpret on television for the Kenyan parliament during the National Assembly and Senate proceedings (PAMCIT 2018). Institutionalisation has often led to tokenism—a failure to ascertain that a deaf audience will in fact be present, rendering the interpretation into meaningless arm-waving—making its hearing audience aware of the importance of signed languages, and lending credence to institutionalised multilingualism, yes, but not aiding communication in any way. The incident of the ‘fake’ sign language interpreter who interpreted live (using meaningless ‘signs’) for world leaders at the
memorial of former President Nelson Mandela’s death on 12 December 2013 will perhaps be recorded in history as the most bizarre case of misinterpretation and tokenism ever, and clearly demonstrates how political correctness without real commitment to communication can be disastrous (Wallmach 2014; see also Turner, Grbić, Stone, Tester & de Wit, Chapter 38, in this volume). This echoes the tokenism and virtue signalling which also occur in some measure for local spoken languages on the continent.

Professional associations

Associations bringing together language professionals from various parts of the African continent initially began with national groupings of translators. Conference interpreters with a professional focus on markets beyond their own national borders preferred to join the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) because many employers have signed sector agreements with AIIC. Interpreters on the continent were thus in a position to propose contracts based on AIIC templates to future employers, whom they could refer to the negotiated conditions of work. However, the majority of interpreters do not belong to AIIC nor to national professional associations such as those in Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Cameroon and South Africa, among others.

Training needs and practices

This section provides a glimpse of some of the training needs and practices for interpreters south of the Sahara, from the first few conference interpreter training initiatives on the continent (one programme in Cameroon and the country example of South Africa) to new training modalities. These new programmes, such as those offered by a consortium of universities offering the Pan-African Master’s in Conference Interpreting (PAMCIT 2018), were able to make use of new technologies and digital interconnectedness from inception to scale up training efforts and address Africa’s training needs systematically, and across its vast distances.

The first interpreter-training institution for conference interpreters in Africa was established by the Government of Cameroon in 1985 and accorded university status in 1993. As the only public higher education institution training translators and interpreters for the public and private sectors, civil service and international organisations, the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) was initially set up to respond principally to the needs of Cameroon as a bilingual country (Ndeffo Tene 2009). The Master of Arts programmes in both translation and interpretation are conducted over a period of two years, with teaching personnel mainly drawn from professional interpreters.

The next example is a country example, that of South Africa, where a flurry of new training programmes for interpreters arose in the aftermath of South Africa’s democratic transition in 1994 and the emerging need for government and industry to operate in eleven official languages. Also part of this context was the need for South Africa to develop a non-racial unitary system of education and training, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Mukora 2006; RSA 1995, 2008). The NQF needed to be flexible enough to integrate vocational training and academic education in different ways (from short courses to full postgraduate degrees) in order to promote employability. Strike action in 1994 by South Africa’s approximately 3000 court interpreters, largely unskilled but employed in large numbers on a full-time basis, provided the impetus for the first interpreting training initiatives around the country from 1998 onwards (Moeketsi & Wallmach 2005), and served as a basis for more diverse offerings in liaison and conference interpreting later on.
Most South African institutions offering training in interpreting follow a ‘language practice’ model rather than the focused interpreting programme more typical of Western contexts, offering a variety of modules alongside consecutive and simultaneous interpreting training, such as translation, lexicography, language planning, editing and research skills, to ensure that graduates have a broad base of skills to draw upon (see Kalina & Barranco-Droege, Chapter 24, in this volume). All of the institutions offer Afrikaans and local African language combinations with English as the pivot language, in response to local interpreting needs for both conference interpreters and liaison interpreters, sometimes including SASL and the major European languages.

Two established professional training programmes in interpreting in South Africa are those offered by the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of the Free State. The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University) was one of the first institutions to establish a specialised postgraduate translation programme in Southern Africa in 1980, which was followed by the establishment of various postgraduate programmes in conference interpreting in the late 1990s. Previously one two-year MA qualification which followed the completion of a bachelor degree (BA), the curriculum has now been spread over two one-year-long qualifications (a postgraduate Honours degree and an MA) after the BA in order to safeguard professional standards and provide students with an exit qualification if they do not qualify for the MA programme. In a variation on standard training practice, the practical conference interpreting modules embedded in the Honours/MA programme are taught as intensive short courses by experienced AIIC trainers, assisted by lecturers who are co-opted according to the students’ language combinations. Classes are multilingual, but the students have lecturers in their combinations to support them. This arrangement works quite well in the absence of funding for European-style programmes. The University of the Free State will always be acknowledged as the institution that trained the interpreters working in Afrikaans and local African languages for South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They offer a BA in Language Practice and an MA specialising in Interpreting.

Shifting the focus from academic offerings in the south, we broaden our perspective to a pan-African response to the evident dearth of interpretation training opportunities. Stemming, in part, from a UN concern about its ageing cohort of professional interpreters, and taking into account African students’ difficulties in obtaining government scholarships or visas to attend training institutions abroad (Muylle 2008), new avenues for professional language skills development at the tertiary level began to be explored on the cusp of the 2000s in order to serve the eastern, southern and western geographical regions (Marais & Delgado Luchner 2019).

With the involvement of more institutional partners, a formal coordinated support project was launched jointly by the United Nations Office in Nairobi and the European Commission: the Pan African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation (PAMCIT). This was the culmination of a series of three pan-African conferences (UNON 2009, 2012, 2014), five stakeholder meetings and ad hoc coordination meetings, from 2009 through to 2015.

The initial core group of universities were public institutions of renown: ASTI at the University of Buea, Cameroon; the Centre for Translation and Interpretation at the University of Nairobi, Kenya; the University of Ghana in Accra; the Universidade Pedagógica de Moçambique in Maputo, Mozambique; and the Faculty of Al-Alsun of Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt (which later did not adopt the proposed curriculum). Gaston Berger University of Saint Louis, Senegal, became a Consortium member in 2015.

To benefit from project funding, the universities were asked to adopt curricula adapted from the European Masters in Conference Interpretation and Translation (EMCI). In 2019, standard MA Conference Interpreting and MA Translation syllabi were developed after...
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A review and a discussion of the feasibility of introducing community and sign language interpreting into the programme. Seventy-seven MA (Translation) and 58 MA (Interpretation) graduates, with one confirmed PhD in translation studies, had successfully completed the programme between 2016 and 2019. Graduates from these universities now work with major regional organisations such as ECOWAS, the AU, the PAP, and in NGOs and private sector translation agencies.

In an attempt to address the gap between the continent’s communication needs and the provision of trained interpreters to serve those needs in legal and healthcare contexts, the PAMCIT project turned its attention to public service interpretation and translation as one of the concluding activities of project implementation (PAMCIT 2018). While the high status of conference interpreters is undoubtedly, and perhaps unquestioningly, echoed in developing world contexts and training curricula, expanding training programmes recognise the need for Africa to leverage local languages to promote access to information in local communities as well as access to public services. Diverse training opportunities do exist both within and outside the formal education system and encompass legal and healthcare settings (cf. Erasmus et al. 1999; Gandu 2018; Moeketsi & Wallmach 2005; Zulu et al. 2017), refugee settings (Delgado Luchner 2019b), and even educational interpreting in spoken and signed languages (Foster & Cupido 2017; Kotzé 2014; Swift 2012; Wittezaele 2008).

Conference interpreting research in the region

In this section, we provide an overview of research in the region, touching on aspects, such as the geopolitics of conference interpreting, the effect of institutional contexts on the interpreting process and the question of directionality, as well as research into interpreter training and new technologies.

The geopolitics of conference interpreting

The disjunct between the realities of language practice and its theoretical underpinnings is an interesting one, and can partly be ascribed to the geopolitics of translation and interpreting (Wallmach 2014). In Africa, there are a number of gaps between the normative standards for the conference interpreting profession (many of which were imported from the West) and the actual practices and processes of interpreting on the ground (see Horváth & Tryuk, Chapter 22, in this volume). These gaps range from differences in norms and working conditions to differences in conceptualisations of the role of the interpreter and translator and are shaped by Africa’s multilingual developing world context.

Conference interpreting in African contexts displays a number of norms that are less usual in European conference interpreting settings. Conference interpreters working in African languages tend to play a more active role when interpreting, since there is often a clear gap in status and education between speakers and delegates, a situation which in developed countries is far more common in liaison interpreting contexts. The interpreter must fill that gap by playing the role of a cultural broker, making complex concepts accessible, and if necessary, creating terminology, a necessary skill when working into a non-standardised language. By interpreting in contexts in which those languages are not normally used, interpreters activate the technical register of these languages as well as new cultural and intellectual spaces, and therefore assist in raising the status of these languages (Selzer 2010; Wallmach 2002). Delgado Luchner (2019b) suggests that the distinction between conference and community interpreting as two separate professional categories is of limited relevance in the African context, which
presents a very different brand of multilingualism than the one historically associated with European nation-states (Blommaert 2009; Tiselius, Chapter 4, in this volume). Ndirangu’s (2017) research focuses on the institutional norms for conference interpreting in East Africa, and the tensions that exist when interpreting norms developed in First World contexts are applied in different regions or geopolitical spaces. She formulates recommendations to improve or optimise the working conditions for conference interpreters in Africa, and in particular for institutions located in the East African region.

The effect of institutional contexts on the interpreting process

Other studies foreground the role of the institution as situated within particular social contexts and its effect on the translation and interpreting process. Wallmach (2014) explores the institutional underpinnings of translation and interpreting under apartheid, and also during the transition to democracy in 1994 and beyond in South Africa. She traces the extent to which translators and interpreters are unwittingly complicit in far larger ideological constructs than those of which they may be consciously aware. A number of studies explore the role of interpreters in parliament. Parliamentarians speak notoriously fast because of limited time granted during the Sittings of the House, and this institutional constraint necessarily affects the interpreting process. Anyele (2015) examines interpreters’ use of strategies at the Pan-African Parliament in relation to the delivery speed of the source text (fast, average, and slow). She categorises these interpreting strategies into meaning-based (lexical dissimilarity) or form-based (lexical similarity), and indicates which strategies are more appropriate for each delivery speed during SI. The study demonstrates that the faster the speed, the more form-based the strategies will be; and, the slower the speed, the more interpreters will resort to meaning-based strategies. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that strategies that lead to meaning-based interpreting are more successful than those which lead to form-based interpreting. Grové (2012) investigates the interpreting service at the Western Cape Legislature and the influence of working conditions, booth behaviour, documentation and other variables on the standard of delivery. Ntuli (2012) investigates the quality of interpreting service as rendered in the Parliament of South Africa and interrogates the process of recruitment and appointment of interpreters.

Directionality and interpreting

In Africa, as elsewhere, market dictates have begun influencing the working conditions of interpreters, who are increasingly being called upon to interpret into their second active working language (typically English) as well as into their first working language. Barkhuizen (2014) supports the view that attitudes to directionality are largely context-driven, and found that freelance conference interpreters (many of whom were not trained) working in Afrikaans and various African or European languages supported local market demands for bidirectional interpreting. Researchers who are members (or aspiring members) of AIIC, such as Koumba (2014), on the other hand, were prompted to investigate the introduction of bidirectional interpreting at the Pan-African Parliament out of concern that the change in institutional working conditions might adversely affect interpreting quality.

Interpreter training

Rapid changes in the world of work for both interpreters and translators have radically altered how and where the professional works, and should, by necessity, be reflected in changing
approaches to training. The rapidity with which changes are occurring, coupled with the lengthy curriculum planning processes of many tertiary institutions, often leave institutions grappling with how to shape the curriculum in light of the new requirements of the profession. This area of research is not well established in African contexts, but there are a few studies that are worthy of note, particularly Delgado Luchner (2019a), who asserts that African multilingualism could be better leveraged in interpreter training courses that transcend the binary distinctions between ‘professional’ and ‘non-professional’ through the implementation of hybrid curricula covering public service interpreting and conference interpreting skills. In Delgado Luchner’s (2015) view, interpreter training at European training institutions relies on a definition of the ‘A language’ or ‘mother tongue’ that is rooted in a twentieth-century Western context, where the language of the home, society, and the education system is often one and the same. It is therefore reasonable for trainers to assume that students display a ‘perfect level of mastery’ of their first language in all situations. This is not the case for Sub-Saharan Africa, where the language(s) spoken in the home generally differ not only from the language(s) spoken on the streets but also from the language(s) of education. This has implications for interpreter training, since it is evident that it would be dangerous simply to import Western models wholesale without taking the pedagogical implications of a very different linguistic situation into account.

In another interesting study, Dose (2014) concludes that interpreting direction appears not to be the main predictor of trainee interpreters’ success in the transfer of source speech cohesive devices; extralinguistic factors such as interpreters’ familiarity with the topic of the speech to be interpreted are far more important. In her study, which focused on the output during examinations of eight experienced simultaneous interpreters attending a short refresher course at the University of the Witwatersrand, she found that most of the interpreters were more successful when rendering a speech on a familiar topic into their second language than when rendering a speech on an unfamiliar topic into their first language. In her view, this finding may imply that interpreters’ context familiarity compensates more for the presumed gap in second-language production skills during second-language interpreting than it does for the presumed gap in second-language comprehension skills during first-language interpreting. Dose’s (2014) research holds implications for interpreter training as well as professional practice. Regarding training, it reinforces the notion that interpreters should be provided with subject-specific training and/or techniques for dealing with speeches on entirely unfamiliar topics. Regarding professional interpreting practice, interpreters’ native and non-native languages should not be the sole criterion under consideration when selecting interpreters for an assignment, as other factors, and in particular interpreters’ level of familiarity with the topic of the speech to be interpreted, may prove much more relevant to interpreting performance.

Other studies worthy of mention include Afolabi’s (2020) research into the mismatch between translation and interpreting training curricula in Nigeria and the requirements of the market, and also Mathey’s (2017) development of an online method of candidate pre-assessment as an alternative to using a standard on-site jury for pre-assessment testing. Lesch (2011) investigates the potential for interpreting research into African contexts, and Kotzé and Wallmach (2020) explore some of the issues that could be seen as forming the backdrop for decolonising the Interpreting Studies curriculum in South Africa.

New technologies in interpreting

International institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union took advantage of advances in telecommunications to begin testing remote interpreting solutions in the 1970s in a bid to reduce the cost of conferences (see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume).
Several high-profile remote conferences were held, one of the first being UNESCO’s General Assembly in 1976, hosted in Nairobi, Kenya, which made use of interpreters located in Paris and connected to the conference via satellite link (Mouzourakis 1996: 30). Remote conference interpreting using a LAN-based solution (with interpreters working from a conventional permanent booth located in another room at the same location) has been standard in South Africa for sittings in National Parliament and at some provincial legislatures since the mid-1990s, providing a fruitful avenue for research (Pienaar 2002; Pienaar & Slabbert 2000; Wallmach 2004). Sogiba (2022) finds that South African parliamentary interpreters tend to experience remote interpreting as disempowering.

Another, more recent, type of remote interpreting, where all participants are located off site, and which involves the use of remote interpreting platforms was almost completely unknown in Africa until the coronavirus pandemic hit the continent in February 2020 (Pilling 2020). Measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 included lockdowns and imposed social distancing rules that forced the postponement or cancellation of on-site meetings and conferences worldwide, and led to an increase in virtual events (Aregger 2020). Bandwidth costs have made platforms such as Interprefy and Voiceboxer impractical for use in Africa at the present time, but signed language interpreters have taken to freeware such as Zoom. Regional and national parliaments (and their interpreters) in countries such as Egypt and Eswatini opted for Skype, in Angola for Zoom, and Namibia chose Facebook as its platform. The South African parliament operates remotely mainly through the Microsoft Teams platform and live broadcasts on the Parliament TV channel (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2020).

**Conclusion**

To cover the breadth and diversity of the African continent in one chapter inevitably means that considerable gaps exist, but it is hoped that the insights offered will serve to encourage the new wave of trained African professionals and academics to critically examine the current state of interpreter training and research along the continuum from conference interpretation to community-based language mediation.

**Note**

1. The use of the term ‘liaison interpreting’ has been a deliberate choice in South Africa (Erasmus et al. 1999), where interpreting ‘for the community’ does not imply informal interpreting or interpreting for migrants, but instead involves assisting citizens to access the courts, healthcare and education of their own country. In a similar vein, Delgado Luchner (2019b) is of the view that ‘public service interpreting and translation’ (PSIT) might be a more suitable term to describe the main stake of dialogue interpreting in Africa than ‘community interpreting’. Although many African countries do have large migrant communities who might require the services of interpreters, the overwhelming majority of potential community interpreting users, in Kenya and most other African countries, are citizens who do not speak the language of their own public institutions.

**Further reading**


References


Kim Wallmach and Nina Okagbue


UNON 2009. Languages for Peace, Security and Development. Nairobi: UNON.


