Conference interpreting in Brazil

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A historical overview

In Brazil, conference interpreting appeared as a profession in the 1940s and slowly grew in the following decades. The oldest record of a major international event in Brazil at which there was interpretation is that of the OAS Pan American Conference in August and September 1947, where the ‘Rio Treaty’ was signed. Truman and other dignitaries such as General Marshall and Eva Perón were present at the conference. Vernon Walters, the Assistant Military Attaché at the American Embassy at the time, acted as an interpreter for the three delegates mentioned above, between English, Portuguese, and Spanish. He also served as an interpreter between Presidents Dutra and Truman (see Walters 1978: 144–149). He seems to have been the only interpreter on these occasions, probably working in consecutive. It was typical for military personnel to serve as interpreters in earlier times when professional interpreters did not exist. Walters continued to act as an interpreter for several American dignitaries all his life, despite being a career military officer and, later, Deputy Director of the CIA and US Ambassador to the UN. He began interpreting as a liaison officer for American forces and the Brazilian Expeditionary Force in Italy in the Second World War (Walters 1978).

In 1948, continuing the trend to promote Pan-American activities begun by the United States during the Second World War, an international conference of the Pan American Health Organization was held in Rio de Janeiro. The organizers procured simultaneous interpretation equipment, which at that time belonged to IBM, and Robert Taves, a wealthy and well-connected businessman, oversaw the hiring of interpreters. Taves contacted Carlos Peixoto de Castro and invited him to participate, since he spoke English. De Castro had never worked as an interpreter, but Taves offered him the opportunity to experiment anyway, since there were no professional interpreters in Rio de Janeiro. They had a trial run at the venue where the event would happen, and that was how professional conference interpreting began in Brazil.

Soon afterwards a microbiology conference was held at the Hotel Quitandinha, in Petrópolis, and de Castro was joined by Erick Charles Drysdale, a British citizen living in Brazil, and Edith van de Beuque, a Brazilian of French origin. She would eventually start an informal group of conference interpreters in Rio de Janeiro, which came to be informally known as ‘Dona Edith’s Group’. As there were no Spanish interpreters in Rio, interpreters from Buenos
Aires in Argentina were invited whenever Spanish was needed, and the Brazilians would go to Buenos Aires whenever there was a need for a Portuguese booth. The task of organizing these activities was eventually taken on by van de Beuque, who was very well connected in Brazilian society at the time, which made her more likely to be hired for international events needing interpretation. She was a talented organizer and administrator, thus taking on the informal leadership of the group, even though everyone worked independently (De Castro 2008).

The rental equipment of IBM was supplied at a very high price, which often caused prospective clients to give up. Carlos Peixoto de Castro, whom colleagues consider the “doyen of Brazil interpreters”, arranged for portable equipment to be assembled by a technician, without sound-proof booths, which the group used to work on several PAHO (Pan American Health Organization) and FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) events in Brazil, with up to three languages. De Castro later arranged for another system to be assembled, enabling four languages to be used, with isolated booths (de Castro 2008).

More than one of these interpreters was Brazilian-born, and not foreigners and children of foreigners (cf. Baigorri-Jalón (2004), and Wyler (2003). De Castro, who started his career in 1948 and remained active in the profession for over 60 years, was the child of Brazilian parents. Another member of ‘Dona Edith’s Group’ from the 1950s, Sérgio de Campos Mello, was also the son of Brazilian parents. Mello eventually went on to work in Europe for more than a decade for organizations linked to the European Commission and the European Parliament. He was one of the first Portuguese A interpreters in the system. He began his career as an interpreter in 1957, at a large medical conference, in Rio de Janeiro. The event coincided with a major event in Buenos Aires to which van de Beuque had travelled with most of Rio’s interpreters, and no one was available. An interpreter introduced him to van de Beuque and he stepped in to help with the conference (Mello 2007).

Van de Beuque had studied interpretation at the Georgetown school under Léon Dostert, who had been responsible for implementing simultaneous interpretation at Nuremberg and the UN in New York. Upon returning to Rio, she found an embryonic group where Carlos Peixoto de Castro and Erick Charles Drysdale were already active. Despite also working as an interpreter between Portuguese, French and English, with active French and passive English, van de Beuque seemed to prefer to organize and coordinate. When she interpreted, she preferred to work into Portuguese, from both English and French, but not vice versa, which shows that Portuguese was her A language although she came from a French-speaking family. According to Mello (2007) and de Castro (2008), the group used to work all over Latin America in such countries as Argentina, Colombia and Uruguay, and even occasionally in Portuguese-speaking Africa.

Due to her strict respect for the seniority of ‘her’ interpreters and her hegemony as their ‘informal boss’, van de Beuque rejected many budding interpreters who sought her out to start a career, saying that the market could not accommodate more interpreters. It led many people to look for other ways of getting into the profession, which eventually changed the way in which the Brazilian market works for conference interpreters.

One such person who had been turned down by van de Beuque was Maria Cândida Bordenave, also a Georgetown graduate under Dostert, and an experienced interpreter, having worked for the State Department in the United States and freelanced in Peru, where she lived for about three years. Bordenave (2007) tells us:

I had come back [to Brazil], I think in 1954. I looked for [Van de Beuque], because I wanted to work as an interpreter, and Edith was the boss … everyone protected each other, no one came into the group …
Bordenave would later be responsible, academically, for the interpreter training portion of the undergraduate translation major in Translation and Interpreting, started by the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), which would change the nature of the interpreting market in Rio.

Another significant person whom Van de Beuque passed over was Ursula (Ulla) Schneider, who would become the driving force and first president of APIC, the São Paulo Association of Conference Interpreters, first bringing together interpreters in the city of São Paulo. The city eventually became the most important freelance market for Brazilian interpreters. Returning to Brazil in 1964, after graduating from the University of Geneva, she sought out van de Beuque, following the unwritten rule for new interpreters trying to start in the profession in Brazil. Schneider (2008) remembers:

I took a bus [from São Paulo] and went to Rio … I proudly had my Geneva diploma with me. … She kept me waiting for two and a half hours in a hotel and then said, ‘What a pity that the technicians left, I wanted to test you. Either way, there are no jobs, unless you can work in the French booth.’

Thus, by having refused Ulla Schneider from São Paulo, and Maria Cândida Bordenave in Rio, van de Beuque, in a way, paved the way, albeit involuntarily, for the dissolution of the hegemony of her group in Brazil, with the creation of APIC in São Paulo in 1971, and the implementation of the PUC-Rio interpreter training programme, which would train a new generation of interpreters in Rio.

Another of the pioneers of conference interpreting in Brazil is Ângela Levy, from São Paulo, thanks to her connections with the American Consulate in the city. At the Pan American Broadcasting Conference in 1950, Levy (then Ângela Lobo), an English instructor at the Brazil-United States Cultural Union, was invited by the United States Consul in São Paulo to interpret for the conference, along with her sister, Ana Maria Lobo, an employee of the American Consulate. She says she had no idea what she would be doing at the event, but quickly learned in the ‘sink or swim’ tradition of the pioneers in the profession. She sat at a table in the back of the room with a microphone and was told to translate whatever was said in Portuguese, into English, and vice versa. That was her training, she says (Levy 2008). Levy’s most important role in interpreting in Brazil would be the setting- up, in the early 1970s, of an interpreter training programme in São Paulo, at the Associação Alumni [Alumni Association], a Brazil-United States Binational Center, created by alumni of American universities. As the centre needed money for its main role of promoting exchange students between Brazil and the United States, it started a programme of English classes, and soon afterwards launched a separate programme to train English / Portuguese translators and interpreters; the programme still exists today. The certificate of completion is a widely accepted certificate in the São Paulo region. The vast majority of APIC and AIIC members in the city began their careers after taking this programme.

In 1954, the city of São Paulo celebrated its 400th anniversary. As part of the celebrations, there were several international events that required interpretation. This was the start of the interpreting career of Jacqueline Branco, who would go on to be one of the founders of APIC with Schneider. A daughter of French parents, born in Argentina and raised in Paraguay, Branco grew up bilingually (French and Spanish), having learned Portuguese after moving to Brazil as a teenager. At the time of the 400th anniversary of São Paulo, she was teaching French at Yázigi, a language school. It was her co-worker, Renata Hammoud, who would become another of the founders of APIC, who invited her to work as an interpreter at the events. As Branco
stated in an interview given to Reynaldo Pagura in São Paulo (Branco 2008), her only reaction was to ask: “And what exactly is an interpreter, in practical terms?” Another future founder of APIC who worked at the 400th anniversary event of São Paulo, but in sports competitions, was Ingrid Orglmeister, who had worked for the first time as an interpreter, at an event in Geneva in 1952. Orglmeister had already been accepted for the interpreting programme in Heidelberg, Germany. She went to Europe before classes started to spend time in Switzerland and was ‘discovered’ by chance, to work for a Brazilian delegation for a conference. She went into the booth without having the slightest notion of what that was. She spent three weeks working alone, without any support. It was mainly English and Portuguese and sometimes passive German. With that she ended up not going to Heidelberg at all but was hired directly by a convention centre in the United States, in Mackinac Island, Michigan (Orglmeister 2008).

With the increasing number of international conferences in São Paulo and van de Beuque’s refusal to integrate the São Paulo interpreters into her group, eight interpreters, led above all by Ursula (Ulla) Schneider, decided in 1971 to create the São Paulo Association of Conference Interpreters (APIC), along the same lines as AIIC. The name of the organization would later change to Professional Association of Conference Interpreters, absorbing members from all over Brazil, and is today the de facto Brazilian association of conference interpreters. Of the eight founders, two still live in São Paulo: Ingrid Orglmeister and Suzana Mizne.

**The rise of professional associations and the interpreting market**

Perhaps because APIC was originally an association of interpreters in São Paulo only—although it now has members all over Brazil and even overseas—AIIC has more members in Rio (30, at the time of writing) than in São Paulo (19, at the time of writing). For many interpreters in São Paulo, it makes more sense to be a member of APIC than of AIIC. However, many APIC members living in São Paulo are also AIIC members. While APIC has 144 members in Brazil (at the time of writing), AIIC has 61, half of them in Rio de Janeiro. While some AIIC members in Rio are also members of APIC, several interpreters in Rio are not. Both organizations have members living in other states in Brazil, but most are in Rio and São Paulo, which are the most important cities in business terms.

The foundation of APIC, in São Paulo in July 1971, was a key driver behind the professionalization of Brazilian interpreters. The Association intended to mirror AIIC in its regulations. It created a professional code of ethics for interpreters, established working conditions, drafted a contract template for its members and determined specific criteria for the admission of new members. The working conditions set up by APIC benefited all Brazilian interpreters, whether members of the Association or not, who adopted them to a large extent.

Although interpreters have different language combinations in Brazil, the vast majority have English and Portuguese, most having Portuguese A and English B, which is the combination in highest demand in the country. The APIC directory lists a minority of professionals who have a second or third working language, in addition to Portuguese and English, with Spanish appearing first among them, followed by French, Italian, German, Japanese, and a few other languages with only one or two interpreters representing them. Brazilian interpretation professionals rely almost exclusively on private-sector clients. French, which was an important part of a language combination in the early days of interpreting in Brazil, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, has dwindled to a language of practically no demand nowadays. The local reality of a market that is largely private-sector-centric has led to a virtually non-existent need for interpretation in UN languages other than English. Even highly technical conferences that bring together specialists from around the world are held in English, under the assumption
that more attendees will be able to follow the activities in English than in other languages. In fact, one can safely state that an interpreter without Portuguese and English in their working combination will work an insignificant number of days in a year. Interpreters also work in both directions, into and out of Portuguese. Likewise, although Brazil is surrounded by Spanish-speaking countries, when a conference has mostly Brazilians in the audience, Spanish-into-Portuguese interpreting is rarely provided, even when some presentations are given in Spanish. Most Brazilians claim to get by in Spanish, at least as far as understanding is involved. Interpretation into Spanish is usually provided only when the event has a large audience of Spanish-speakers and currently there are enough professionals with Spanish in their language combination in Brazil to meet this occasional demand. In short, Brazil is the only non-Spanish-speaking country of Latin America, but its economic importance in the region and its extensive business interests with the United States make Portuguese/English, in both directions, the dominant language combination in the Brazilian market by far. Brazil is also considered a separate AIIC region in itself, because of its relatively high membership, while the rest of South America forms one separate region.

A common new trend these days is to have interpretation into LIBRAS, the Brazilian sign language, at many official events. This has been the trend for some years now, but seems to have increased since early 2019 when a new President was inaugurated, perhaps due to the fact that the First Lady is deeply involved with social work in the deaf community. APIC is currently considering the inclusion of sign language interpreters into the Association (França 2020), but the process is in its early stages and not enough data is available at the time of writing.

Brazil has hosted several major international events in recent years, among them the Earth Summit in 1992, Rio +20 in 2012, the FIFA World Cup in 2014, and the Summer Olympics in 2016. These are few and far between, with a negligible impact on the local interpretation market. At the Earth Summit of 1992 and the Rio +20, both being UN-related events, UN interpreters were brought in, mostly from New York, with Portuguese A (mostly AIIC/APIC members) interpreters hired locally in Brazil.

This text is being written in 2021 and should, therefore, include a few observations on the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the professional interpretation market in Brazil. The fast spread of the disease led Brazil to lockdown. Restrictions resulted in conferences being cancelled or postponed, and demand for on-site interpretation services dropping close to zero. Freelancers (most Brazilian professionals) were forced to stay at home for the first months of the pandemic, with significant losses in revenue. A survey conducted by APIC showed the following results (participants accounted for 50 per cent of the entire membership): 62.2 per cent of respondents worked fewer days in 2020 vis-à-vis 2019; with the figure leaping to 80.5 per cent when those who worked the same number of days as the previous year were included. As the pandemic progressed and both buyers and providers of language services realized they needed to adapt to this unprecedented situation, the second half of the year saw an increase in demand for RSI (remote simultaneous interpreting, see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume). Interpreters started to get acquainted with the technology needed to work from home and technical solutions were provided. This led to a market uptrend towards the end of 2020: the APIC survey also shows that 98.7 per cent of respondents saw their number of working days increase between August and December 2020—not enough to offset all losses incurred throughout the year, but still a positive sign of a market that seems to be maturing around remote solutions. Those developments are still unfolding at the time this text is being published; as RSI advances, this topic will warrant a dedicated analysis, including the necessary hindsight to accurately assess it.
Interpreter training

Over the years, several training programmes have been created in Brazil, but most have ceased to exist. Only two remain, and only one of them is still part of a university.

Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio)

In Brazil, the first institution to be interested in the training of interpreters was the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. In 1968, the then head of the Department of Letters at PUC-Rio, Amélia Lacombe, took the initiative of offering alternatives other than teacher-training to prospective language teachers in the ‘Letters’ curriculum (see Martins 2007). Some did not continue, but in 1976, two different majors appeared: translator-interpreter and translator, and in 1978, the training of interpreters was finally disconnected from that of translators.

When Bordenave (see the section on History above) returned to Brazil in the late 1960s after living in other South America countries, she saw from an advertisement in a newspaper that the acting President of the PUC-Rio at the time was a former classmate of hers. She got in touch and found out that the institution was desperately looking for an interpreting professor. Thus, by coincidence, PUC-Rio found its first interpreting professor, an interpreter trained under Dostert himself, the father of simultaneous interpreting. Because it was an integral part of the Letters programme and had to share the curriculum with the translation courses, the specific training of interpreters was only a minor component. The first specific courses in interpretation were offered in 1971, because the students only took these courses near the end of the programme. There were only two courses then: one in consecutive interpreting and another in simultaneous interpreting. Bordenave eventually became a translation professor, and the interpreting courses were taught by her former teaching assistant, André Bekenn (as reported by Bordenave 2007), trained by Bordenave. The programme has always offered only English and Portuguese as possible combinations.

The programme has undergone many changes over the years, and in 2003 it was split off from the undergraduate programme, which kept only translation as a major. Interpreting became a Certificate Programme under Continuous Education, and in 2008 became a Graduate Certificate in Interpreting, which is how it is offered nowadays, albeit with a different curriculum from 2008 and with fewer hours, comprising only two semesters.

The Associação Alumni [Alumni Association] of São Paulo

Coincidentally, at the same time, the training course for translators and interpreters offered by Alumni Association (see the History section above), started up in São Paulo. The creator of this programme, who ran it for many years, was Ângela Levy. The programme started towards the end of 1970, without much prior planning. For the first class, 14 candidates applied. They were tested mainly for language skills and their knowledge of current events: seven were selected, only one of whom was Brazilian. The other six were foreign interpreters who lived in the area and were interested in adding Portuguese to their language combination. The first two months were basically a Portuguese language brush-up. Levy created a consecutive interpretation component in late 1970. Eventually, a simultaneous course was devised. At this time, Levy had been joined by a Scottish teacher of English, Clare Charity. Their translation and interpreting training programme eventually consolidated into a four-semester non-degree programme. Levy and Charity went on to build an excellent reputation for the Alumni programme,
having trained the majority of APIC and AIIC interpreters who currently work in this area of
the country.

Says Levy (2008) in an interview:

I learned by trial and error … there was no interpretation course [in Brazil] unless you
were going to take it abroad. So, when I taught, I always told my students: ‘I’ll teach you
everything I did. When it was wrong and it didn’t work I’ll say, ‘don’t do it’ and when it
worked—it’s kind of guessing, because I had to go groping around—and I’ll say: Do it
because that worked.’

As can be observed, in their beginnings, both the PUC-Rio and the Alumni Association
programmes relied on two Brazilian pioneers, Bordenave and Levy. There was no pre-
established curriculum and courses were added on the fly. There were hardly any publications
at the time that discussed or reflected on interpreter training to direct them and both had to rely
on intuition and on their personal experience.

The following institution also had an interpreter training programme, as an isolated
programme.

Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP)
The interpreter training programme at PUC-SP was founded in 1999, having the chance to
benefit much more from the bibliography available (internationally) regarding interpreter
training. It was conceived of as a programme separate from translation training and lan-
guage teacher training. It was offered as a Certificate Programme from 1999 through 2018;
it's students were mostly graduates from various fields of knowledge and came from various
institutions. Although the legislation allowed for it, the number of students without a university
degree (only with high school) always represented a very small percentage of the student body.
It was a four-semester programme focusing on the language pair Portuguese and English, in
both directions.

Although it was the first programme in South America to appear in the AIIC Directory, and
several of its former students have gone on to become members of both APIC and AIIC, the
administration of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo decided to stop accepting
new students for it in 2016 and closed it in 2018, when the last class graduated. It never had the
large classes considered ideal by the university administrators.

Research on interpreting in Brazil

Without specific MA and PhD programmes in Interpreting Studies, very little research
associated with interpreting in Brazil per se has been carried out in the country. There are a
few MA theses and PhD dissertations in the online list published by the Brazilian Ministry
of Education that focus on some aspects of interpretation in Brazil itself. They are: (1) MA
thesis, by Daniela de Vasconcelos Araújo, entitled Interpreter Training Courses in Brazil and
the Best Practices Recommended by the International Association of Conference Interpreters,
at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio (PUC-Rio), in 2017; and the following PhD
dissertations, (2) by Lúcia Helena de Sena França, entitled A ‘Glocal’ Interpreter Training
Program: Focusing on the Brazilian Reality and World Tendencies, in 2003 (focusing on a spe-
cific programme in Brazil), (3) by Reynaldo Pagura (2010), entitled Conference Interpreting
in Brazil: A History of its Professional Practice and the Training of Brazilian Interpreters (the
main focus of which is the history of conference interpreting in Brazil, with one chapter telling
the history of training in the country), from which most of the information in this chapter has
been drawn and is also summarized in Pagura (2012); (4) by Luciana Latarini Ginezi, entitled
Interpreting Training in Undergraduate Programs: Learners Corpora Study, in 2015 (also
focusing on a specific programme in Brazil); and (5) by Patrizia Cavallo, entitled Rebuilding
a Model of Conference Interpreting Competence, in 2019, dealing with the notion of compe-
tence in interpreting. Numbers 2, 3, and 4 were defended at USP (University of Sao Paulo) and
number 5 at UFRGS (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul).

In 2013, a unique initiative took place at the University of Sã o Paulo: The First Brazilian
Symposium in Interpreting, which can be considered the first and only full-fledged event
totally dedicated to Interpreting Studies in Brazil. Not only did it gather interpreters, interpreter
trainers, and scholars from the whole country, but it had as its main guest speakers some of
the best-known scholars in Interpreting Studies in the world, namely Marianne Lederer (ESIT-
Paris), Daniel Gile (ESIT-Paris), and Franz Pöchhacker (University of Vienna).

Besides MA theses and PhD dissertations, there have recently been some graduation papers
written by students of the Graduate Certificate programme at the Pontifical Catholic University
of Rio (PUC-Rio). A partial list of these papers was presented at the ABRATES [Brazilian

Finally, two journals mainly dedicated to Translation Studies have published special issues
on interpreting, namely, TradTerm, by the University of Sã o Paulo, in 2014 (volume 23) and
Tradução em Revista, by the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio in 2017 (issues 23 and 24).

Conclusion

The conference interpreting market in Brazil has always been centred on the private market,
with interpreters working on a freelance basis. As mentioned above, most of the work is done
in Portuguese and English, in both directions. Over time there have been large international
events in connection with international conferences, but these are uncommon situations,
having little or no influence on the regular market. Most interpreters work for business, gov-
ernment and, less frequently, academic events, usually held in English and Portuguese only.
Training opportunities have, unfortunately, been reduced, with the closing of the programme at
the PUC-SP and the programme at PUC-Rio reduced in its number of hours. In Sã o Paulo, the
largest market in Brazil, only the non-degree programme at Associação Alumni continues, but
the Translation Department itself, where the course was housed, was shut and the course placed
in the English as a Second Language Department. This trend together with the increase in RSI,
that can be provided from anywhere, and online training courses in several parts of the world,
make it seem that Conference Interpreting, as traditionally known, is at a crossroads in Brazil
and only time will tell which direction the profession will take in the country.

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