Introduction
Conference interpreters have traditionally been regarded as the elite among translation and interpreting professionals, with considerably higher levels of occupational prestige than, for example, (written) translators and community interpreters. However, recent research suggests that conference interpreters’ status is not as high as could be expected and that the profession currently faces major challenges with implications for professional and occupational status. Against this backdrop, the present chapter sets out to examine the status of conference interpreters. Status is a complex and dynamic notion, and extensive analyses of historical and current developments relating to market, motivations, technologies and psychologies are needed to provide a full illumination of this multifaceted topic. This chapter can only be a small contribution.

The chapter begins with an outline of the key concept of status and adjacent notions, notably (occupational) prestige, profession and professionalization; it discusses the interrelations of these concepts and how they can be, and have been, approached and studied. Based on this conceptual framework, the chapter analyzes the professionalization of conference interpreting and developments in conference interpreters’ status over the years. It identifies the main threats to status on today’s conference interpreting market and concludes with a discussion of the challenges conference interpreters will have to address in the future in order to define a niche for themselves in the ever-changing professional landscape of the twenty-first century.

Key concepts and approaches
This section introduces and discusses the boundaries between the concept of status and related notions. After a discussion of the partially overlapping notions of ‘status’ and ‘prestige’, we examine two concepts that are intrinsically linked to both status and prestige, namely ‘profession’ and ‘professionalization’.
Status and prestige

In the field of sociology, the term ‘status’ has a variety of meanings and usages. In its broadest sense, it simply refers to some position in a social system which has a particular role attached: that of interpreter, for example. In a narrower sense, the more relevant one here, it refers to a position in a hierarchy and signifies social worth or prestige (Bruce & Yearley 2006: 289). Applied to an occupational or professional group, such as conference interpreters, the term of choice in sociology is ‘occupational prestige’, defined as the social value people attach to jobs or occupations (Scott & Marshall 2015: 525) and, hence, the social position an occupation or profession affords its members (Dam 2015). Near-synonymous terms are ‘occupational status’, ‘job status’ and ‘job prestige’. The collocation ‘professional status’, on the other hand, is used in connection with professionalization (see below): professionalized occupations and their members can be said to have acquired professional status.

Some sociologists propose a distinction between (occupational) status and prestige: the former would be determined by objective parameters, such as income and education, and the latter by subjective evaluations of worth (see the discussion in Ollivier 2000). Status, then, would give information about the desirability of an occupation in terms of material rewards, whereas prestige would reflect evaluations of its moral worthiness and thus be linked to social esteem and respect. However, sociologists (and translation and interpreting scholars, for that matter) use the two terms more or less interchangeably, and survey-based occupational prestige scales inevitably reflect parameters of both kinds.

There are several ways to measure occupational prestige or status. The most common method in sociology is to construct occupational scales. This can be done in various ways. Researchers can, for example, amalgamate a series of measurable job characteristics (e.g. income and educational entry qualifications), or they can gather survey data on how the general public ranks a variety of jobs and use those rankings as the basis for a scale (Bruce & Yearley 2006: 219). Sociologists’ work with occupational prestige scales has yielded important insights into status determinants, i.e. factors that influence perceptions of—and signal—occupational prestige. Income is one such mark of prestige and a powerful status determinant. Education is another indicator of status: length of training has been shown to correlate with income and prestige, with the proviso that jobs requiring abstract university-based education typically rank higher than jobs with similar periods of on-the-job training. On the other hand, professionals employed in sectors associated with considerable value to society (education, healthcare) may be ranked higher than their typical income would suggest.

Occupational prestige scales are widely believed to be contextual: tied to time, space and culture in composition and application (Bruce & Yearley 2006: 219). The determinants of occupational prestige, however, seem to be relatively universal. Many studies have shown consensus—across nationality, class, gender, ethnicity and other categories—about which factors determine status, though the relative weight attributed to parameters may vary (for an overview, see Nakao, Hodge & Treas 1990). Specifically for conference interpreting, occupational prestige has been studied through surveys designed to elicit evaluations of five determinants of status with a high degree of universal validity (cf. Dam & Zethsen 2008): (1) income; (2) education/special skills and expertise; (3) visibility/fame; (4) power/influence; and (5) importance/value to society (Dam & Zethsen 2013; Gentile 2016; see also Choi & Lim 2002). Additional status determinants are associated with the concepts of profession and professionalization as discussed below.
Status and profession(alization)

Status is closely linked to the concepts of profession and professionalization. In its briefest and most neutral version, a profession can be described as an occupation that requires special education and skills and, in turn, affords its members recognition and a certain status in society (Grbić 2015: 322; Pöchhacker 2016: 160; our emphasis). Professionalization is the process that turns a mere occupation into a full-fledged profession; as such, it is one of the most important strategies members of an occupational group can deploy in order to gain status (Bruce & Yearley 2006: 245; Sela-Sheffy 2010; for more critical perspectives, see Scott & Marshall 2015: 601 and Grbić 2015).

Numerous attempts have been made over the years to develop a theoretical framework to distinguish professions from non-professions and to identify the factors that influence their development (Dam & Zethsen 2011, cf. Weiss-Gal & Welbourne 2008). Two main approaches have emerged, namely the trait approach (or attribute approach) and the power approach. The trait approach relies on core characteristics that define a profession, setting it apart from non-professions or mere occupations. Greenwood (1957: 45) identified five critical traits: (1) a body of abstract knowledge; (2) professional authority; (3) community sanction (4) a regulatory code of ethics; and (5) a professional culture sustained by professional associations. Over the years, other scholars have pointed out additional traits, including a set of distinguishing specialist skills, commitment to service and remuneration reflecting professional status. The power approach, whose main proponent is Freidson (1970), focuses on how occupations establish and maintain dominance when confronted with threats to their status from competing interests (such as other occupational groups, government and clients). This approach basically assumes that professions struggle for an exclusive right to perform certain types of work and are in constant conflict with other groups over issues of boundaries, clients, resources and licensing. In accordance with the power approach, Freidson (1970) defined professions as occupations which have a dominant position of power in the division of labour in their area of practice and thus have control over the content of their work.

Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008) propose to combine the two influential approaches and suggest the following eight criteria as indicative of a profession: (1) public recognition of professional status; (2) professional monopoly over specific types of work; (3) professional autonomy of action; (4) possession of a distinctive knowledge base; (5) professional education regulated by members of the profession; (6) an effective professional organization; (7) codified ethical standards; and (8) prestige and remuneration reflecting professional standing.

From a trait-cum-power perspective, then, professionalizing implies striving to achieve the features of a profession outlined above. Wilensky (1964) suggests a five-stage process: (1) making the occupation full-time; (2) setting up formal training; (3) developing a professional association; (4) seeking legal and institutional protection; and (5) adopting a code of ethics (cf. Grbić 2015: 322). Empirically, however, professions do not necessarily develop in that order, or even in discrete phases (see Tseng 1992, for an account of the development of the conference interpreting profession in Taiwan). More importantly, professions rarely develop steadily and accumulatively: there are giant leaps forward at some points in time and serious setbacks at others, sometimes leading to de-professionalization (Hermanowicz & Johnson 2014). The power approach helps us to understand the ‘professional project’ (Larson 1977) as a constant struggle and professions as anything but stable entities. If anything, professions are likely to achieve inner/internal power with far greater ease than they do external power (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne 2008: 289). Inner power denotes the ability of practitioners to work...
cooperatively as an organized group and exert influence over the behaviour of group members; signs of inner power would be a strong professional association and a code of ethics that members abide by. External power refers to the ability to exert influence outside the profession itself, e.g. over competing groups of practitioners, clients and decision-makers; signs of external power would be measures of occupational closure such as a licence to exclusive practice (protected title, monopoly over specific types of work) and control over training and access to the profession.

In the short history of conference interpreting, we have seen both giant leaps towards professionalization and setbacks. History also shows that the conference interpreting profession has been able to achieve inner power more readily than external power, but also that professionalization efforts have been targeted at external stakeholders at an exceptionally early stage. These and other dynamics will be described in the following section.

The professionalization of conference interpreting: the success story of the twentieth century

While interpreting is probably one of the oldest activities practised by mankind, conference interpreting is a phenomenon of the twentieth century (see Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez & Payás, Chapter 1, in this volume). It originated in the multilateral negotiations at the end of the First World War and grew with the foundation of the League of Nations and other international organizations immediately after the war (Baigorri-Jalón 2014; Pöchhacker 2011). The need to conduct meetings in at least two languages led to the emergence of the first conference interpreters. The interpreting mode of the day was consecutive. Attempts to introduce simultaneous interpreting as a time-saving measure were made as early as the 1920s, but simultaneous interpreting only had its breakthrough after the Second World War, when it was implemented successfully with four working languages at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal. Shortly afterwards, simultaneous was adopted as the mode of choice by the United Nations, and both the use of simultaneous interpreting and the demand for a skilled workforce capable of performing this demanding task grew with the proliferation, in the 1950s and 1960s, of international organizations with multilateralism and multilingualism as core values (García-Beyaert 2015), providing a decisive boost for the professionalization of conference interpreting.

University-level training

Professionalization was bolstered by the setting up of interpreting schools. The first university-level training programmes for conference interpreters were created in the 1940s and 1950s (see Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez & Payás, Chapter 1, in this volume), and especially in Europe they grew steadily in numbers and degree of academization during the second half of the twentieth century. Their role in securing the professional traits described above should not be underestimated. Notably, the distinctive knowledge base necessary for an occupation to claim professional status (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne’s criterion 4) is sanctioned through education at university level, and a university diploma enhances professionals’ prestige (criterion 8). However, the body of abstract knowledge—suggested as a critical trait already by Greenwood (1957) and still widely believed to be at the heart of a profession as it legitimizes professionals’ claims to closure and rewards—has never been the hallmark of conference interpreting. Even at highly research-oriented universities, conference interpreting programmes continue to emphasize (practical) training in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, whereas the status
of theory tends to be much more fragile (see Gile & Barranco-Droege, Chapter 25, in this volume). This paradox is no doubt attributable to the power of the community of practitioners, institutionalized primarily through AIIC.

**Leverage through organization: the role of AIIC**

Set up in 1953 to regulate working conditions, establish professional standards and control access to the conference interpreting profession (Pöchhacker 2011: 311), the International Association of Conference Interpreters, AIIC, has been a key player in the professionalization of conference interpreters (Boéri 2015; García-Beyaert 2015). In the early years, the inner power of the new profession was mobilized and enforced with the adoption, in 1957, of the AIIC Code of Ethics and Professional Standards, which continues to regulate the profession today.

Achieving external power was part of the vision from the outset, too. AIIC is designed as a worldwide organization to which conference interpreters all over the world belong via direct, individual membership (rather than being an umbrella organization for national associations such as the FIT). The system of direct membership has granted AIIC a unique, trade-union-like position to negotiate the working conditions and remuneration of its (freelance) members with important employers of conference interpreters such as the United Nations and the European Union (Pöchhacker 2011: 311–312; Setton 2010: 68; Thiéry 2015: 14). Occupational closure was also part of the association’s ambitious agenda from the very beginning. Although AIIC has been unable to control entry to the profession as a whole, the prestigious quality stamp that AIIC membership grants to practitioners was (and continues to be) the association’s main measure of inclusion—and exclusion. To become a member of AIIC today, an applicant must document a minimum of 150 days’ work as a conference interpreter and, through a sponsorship system, at least three active AIIC members who have worked with the candidate must vouch for their professional competence and, as an extended measure of internal control, compliance with AIIC norms as expressed in the Code of Ethics and the Professional Standards.

External power has also been mobilized through the regulation of training. The association’s early-days ‘school policy’ granted AIIC recognition to universities that followed this policy. Today, it is the AIIC Training and Professional Development Committee that “sets and monitors training standards for interpreting schools around the world” (AIIC 2014). One powerful measure of closure is the so-called Interpreting Schools and Programmes Directory, which lists, and thus endorses, training institutions that meet AIIC’s best-practice criteria—and excludes those which do not. These criteria curtail entry to training (admission must be subject to an aptitude test) and to practice (a degree in conference interpreting must only be awarded if the candidate’s competence is judged to be consistent with professional entry requirements as assessed by accredited conference interpreters). Criteria prescribing the involvement of the professional body in training (courses must be designed and interpretation classes taught by professional conference interpreters) have the double effect of securing influence on training institutions (external power) and of socializing newcomers to the profession (internal power). All in all, AIIC is highly involved in ensuring Weiss-Gal and Welbourne’s criterion 5: professional education regulated by members of the profession. Interestingly, according to AIIC’s best-practice criteria for training institutions, instruction in both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting is an “eliminatory criterion”, whereas the recommended “theory component” is not (AIIC 1999). This shows that AIIC is also active in defining the ‘distinctive knowledge base’ of conference interpreters and, in doing so, manages to impose its values (practice-oriented and
practice-led training) on powerful social players, universities, which traditionally promote a completely different value system (theory and research-led training).

In sum, there is no doubt that AIIC has played a key role in the remarkably fast professionalization of conference interpreting in the second half of the twentieth century. The association has, however, not been able to secure an important criterion for full professional status: monopoly (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne’s criterion 2). Anyone can in principle call themselves a conference interpreter, and can practise as one. And although AIIC does organize a considerable proportion of all conference interpreters worldwide, a large number of practitioners are not members of the association and thus escape its strict control and quality measures. At present, some 2,900 conference interpreters worldwide are members of AIIC (www.aiic.net), and it has been estimated that at least as many practise conference interpreting without being organized in AIIC (Pöchhacker 2011: 312; Setton 2010: 68).

**Deregulation and fragmentation**

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the profession’s main interlocutor experienced a setback. After several court cases and long legal battles in various countries, the Federal Trade Commission in the United States decided, in 1996–1997, that many of the regulations enforced by AIIC, especially the schedule of minimum fees, curtailed competition and fell under anti-trust law. As a result, AIIC ‘rules’ were generally turned into ‘recommendations’ (Boéri 2015: 32), sparking a development that has been referred to as “deregulation” (Thiery 2015: 15). Despite the loss of regulatory power, however, AIIC arguably continues to shape the conference interpreting market through its recommendations and best-practice criteria. As suggested by Boéri, interpreters targeting the (large) market covered by AIIC “are likely to find that it is in their best interest to respect such guidelines” (2015: 41). In addition, AIIC recommendations and best-practice criteria are reflected—almost on a one-to-one basis—in the interpreting policies and practices of the large intergovernmental organizations where many interpreters (staff or freelance, members of AIIC or not) are employed. The European Parliament’s best-practice criteria for training, for example, are essentially identical to those of AIIC. The criteria of the EU-supported accreditation scheme for universities, the European Masters in Conference Interpreting (EMCI), closely mirror AIIC recommendations too. The regulations applying to conference interpreters’ working conditions are also similar across the board, no matter whether the standard-setting power corresponds to AIIC or to the interpreting divisions within the large international organizations. ‘Division of power’ may therefore be a better description of recent trends than ‘deregulation’. The former term would also reflect the advent in recent decades of numerous professional associations for (conference) interpreters (and translators) at national level. However, the inevitable consequence of both deregulation and division of power is a more fragmented labour market (Pym et al. 2013). Indeed, recent research on the occupational status of conference interpreters shows signs of deregulation and fragmentation, as will be discussed below. But first we look at the perceptions of conference interpreters through a historical lens.

**From stars to professionals: implications for status and (self-)image**

As we have seen, the main turning point in the history of conference interpreting is the twentieth century, when the long-standing act of mediating between languages and cultures took the shape of a profession with the birth of simultaneous interpreting. This shift represented a watershed not only in the way the profession was performed, but also in the way it was
perceived by interpreters, the mass media and the general public. With professionalization, the image of interpreters shifted from 'natural-born stars' to 'trained professionals'—or from "marvel" to "profession" (Baigorri-Jalón 2004: 84).

The changes that took place with the introduction of simultaneous interpreting created a wide gap between the pioneers of the profession, who worked mostly in the consecutive mode, and the so-called 'simultaneists', who were recruited among the graduates of the first interpreting schools. The consecutive interpreters working in the interbellum period did not accept this change easily, as they considered themselves to have been dethroned and pushed out of the spotlight of the podia where they used to perform consecutive interpreting. The new breed of interpreters were regarded with a good deal of contempt, being referred to as "parrots" and "les téléphonistes" (Baigorri-Jalón 2004: 71).

In the passage from stars to professionals, conference interpreters' status went from "ascribed", to "achieved" (Gentile 2017: 46). Indeed, the first generation of interpreters were granted the ascribed status of interpreters simply because they were bilinguals who found themselves in the right place at the right historical moment and possessed qualities that enabled them to perform the job without having being trained to do so. They were mostly diplomats or army officers who, in most cases, did not consider interpreting to be their lifetime career. From the 1950s onwards, the status of interpreter began to be achieved, as the majority of interpreting students were not natural bilinguals but had to undergo long periods of training. And, unlike the first generation of interpreters, this new generation entered the profession because they wanted to pursue interpreting as a lifetime career. They were mostly women, whose growing presence in the profession has been described as one of the most visible sociological changes that have taken place “from the beginnings when there were hardly any women to the present day where the balance has swayed towards the female sex” (Baigorri-Jalón 2004: 169).

Simultaneous interpreting gave rise to quite a few concerns about the image that others (and interpreters themselves) had of the profession, since the interpreter’s voice was delivered through mechanical equipment, which could give the impression that the interpreter was only a part of a machine. As Baigorri-Jalón (2004) points out, at the United Nations there was a sharp reaction in the 1970s against the idea that others had of conference interpreters: since they were regarded as rare birds who possessed extraordinary skills, they were considered to be able to work for more than six hours without a break. These working conditions were not sustainable, and a strike was organized to push for improvements for the new cadre of professionals.

These developments reflect the first paradox of the professionalization of conference interpreting: at the exact moment when the field became more professionalized with the birth of the simultaneous mode and the opening of academic institutions, conference interpreting experienced a period of crisis, characterized by the gap between the mythical image portrayed by the mass media and the poor working conditions in the simultaneous booths (Gentile 2017: 44). In the transition from consecutive to simultaneous, interpreters’ old self-perception as stars was shaken to its core. They felt that the allure attached to their performances and the image of prima donnas who accompanied diplomats in the most important meetings had been downgraded to mechanical work done behind a glass pane that made them invisible. As professionalization progressed, the second generation of interpreters became proud professionals, praised and admired by laypeople for their virtuosity as simultaneous interpreters; but they did not share the glory of the first generation, and worldly considerations of working conditions had become an imperative.

The second paradox of the profession is related to the passage from ascribed to achieved status: when being an interpreter no longer meant being a bilingual from birth or due to
particular personal circumstances, interpreters’ self-perceived status decreased. Even the institution of interpreting schools dealt a blow to the self-image of interpreters, because it suggested that interpreters were made, not born, and that conference interpreting was not a job for a small elite of diplomats and intellectuals, but a job that anyone could do if properly trained. The notion that conference interpreters were born rather than made remains in evidence even today, as testified by a recent study in which one interpreter comments: “interpretation has little to do with academic studies. Languages can be learned in many ways and the best way is usually living it” (Gentile 2016: 107).

The status of conference interpreters in the twenty-first century

Contemporary interpreting literature continues to reflect the glamorous image of twentieth-century conference interpreters, projecting traces of both stardom and professionalism (Dam & Zethsen 2013). Aspects of visibility and (connection to) fame and power still surface in descriptions of the interpreter as a figure with access to restricted places, where s/he has “the opportunity of working with politicians, ambassadors, and other senior public figures” as well as “the chance to witness historical events” (Jones 2014: 129). The international, “glamorous” (Gile 2004: 13), “high-stakes nature of the conference environment” (Setton 2010: 69) and the depiction of conference interpreters’ clients as “highly visible” (Gile 2004: 13) and “financially potent” (Pöchhacker 2011: 311) command consensus in the literature. Conference interpreters are “often perceived as virtuosos” (Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger 2008: 81), and their special skills and competences are foregrounded as “admirable” (Setton 2010: 68) and “almost magical” (Jones 2014: 128). Consequently, (simultaneous) conference interpreting “has always impressed observers” (Setton 2010: 69), and non-interpreters are sometimes “filled with wonderment” about the mental and linguistic agility needed to talk and listen at the same time (Jones 2014: 128). Hence, the image of conference interpreting continues to be that of “a much-admired feat commanding high social esteem—and substantial fees” (Pöchhacker 2011: 322). Consistent with this image, one empirical study has shown that the representation of conference interpreting in the Turkish media is closely connected with “big events”, “big money”, “big careers” and “big names” (though also with “big mistakes”) (Diriker 2005; see also Diriker 2004).

Although the topic of status has a prominent position in the interpreting literature, it has only become an object of research in recent years. So far, it has mainly been addressed indirectly or partially in studies with a broader thematic focus, most of which have been conducted as surveys aimed at eliciting interpreters’ attitudes, opinions and perceptions of their jobs, working conditions and professional selves (Dam 2015). With few exceptions, this research targets community interpreters (e.g. Hale 2007; Ozolins 2004; Salaets & Van Gucht 2008). Studies that do include conference interpreters tend to have a comparative angle, contrasting interpreters with translators or conference interpreters with community interpreters. One major pattern that emerges from these studies is that interpreters in general enjoy higher status than translators, and that conference interpreters are granted a higher position on the occupational prestige scale than community interpreters (Choi & Lim 2002; Dam & Zethsen 2013; Gentile 2016; Katan 2009; Setton & Guo 2009; see also Tiselius, Chapter 4, in this volume).

In a study with an exclusive focus on occupational prestige, Dam and Zethsen (2013) investigated the status of the presumed stars of the interpreting (and translation) profession—conference interpreters—by means of questionnaires administered to 23 Danish staff interpreters employed at the EU and, for comparison, 63 Danish EU-employed staff translators. Occupational status was assessed by means of questions modelled on the five
status determinants described above: (1) remuneration; (2) education/expertise; (3) visibility; (4) power/influence; and (5) importance/value to society. The main conclusions were that these interpreters were highly paid and highly trained professionals, that they saw themselves as highly skilled experts and that this view was shared by the general public. Responses regarding visibility were less clear: the interpreters generally indicated that they worked at the heart of policy- and decision-making but still assessed their work as only moderately visible to others. Evaluations of their influence as interpreters were extremely low: below two on a five-point scale. They generally regarded their job as important but also indicated that the importance attached to it by non-interpreters tended to be more limited. In addition, the interpreters were asked to rate their occupational status on a five-point scale, and they positioned themselves higher than the translators (3.39 vs 2.56) but clearly not at the very top of the prestige scale.

Similar results were obtained in a large-scale survey by Gentile (2016). In her PhD thesis on the status and professionalization of conference and community interpreters, she surveyed 805 conference interpreters worldwide. When asked about their self-perceived status, only 56.5 per cent of respondents related it to that of full-fledged, high-status professionals such as medical doctors and university lecturers. What is more, when asked to assess how society perceives their status, only 22.9 per cent indicated that the general public viewed them as professionals of this calibre. Beyond indicating a less than top-prestige profession, these findings illustrate a discrepancy in status perceptions in the field: interpreters tend to consider themselves full-fledged professionals but believe they are not accorded the status they deserve by the general public. In this regard, gender and the feminization of the profession (see Defrancq, Collard, Magnifico & Iglesias Fernández, Chapter 30, in this volume), which started in the mid-twentieth century, may play a role. Research has shown that female interpreters tend to attribute lower status to their profession and perceive their work as less valued by others than their male colleagues do, a finding that tallies with theories indicating that some professions are underestimated just because they are female-dominated (Gentile 2018).

There is thus some empirical evidence to indicate that the prestige of the conference interpreting profession has declined since its heyday in the twentieth century. In fact, this was the declared impression of the respondents in the 2002 AIIC Workload Study (AIIC 2002). This development has coincided with, and may partially have been triggered by, the deregulation and fragmentation of the interpreting market described above, along with a series of other factors as discussed in the following section.

Current and future challenges

Surveys have identified a variety of factors that have impacted negatively on the profession in recent years, including impressions of a shrinking market with increasingly bad working conditions and decreasing fees, fierce competition, increased technologization and the spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF) (AIIC 2005; Gentile & Albl-Mikasa 2017; Neff 2015). These factors, probably interrelated, have also been identified as the main sources of concern and discontent, disillusionment even, among conference interpreters. Among the developments invariably mentioned in the literature as threats to the future of the profession, two stand out: the spread of ELF and technologization, notably the advent of remote interpreting (Diriker 2015: 322; Donovan 2017; Gentile 2016). In the literature, these ‘threats’ are often analyzed as either technical impediments to quality or detractors of motivation and job satisfaction; more importantly in the present context, they have implications for occupational and professional status.
English as a lingua franca

The global spread of English as a lingua franca is widely considered to be one of the main challenges for the conference interpreting profession today (see Albl-Mikasa, Chapter 39, in this volume). Two main aspects are lamented by interpreters: the technical-linguistic and motivational challenges it causes, on the one hand, and the implications for the interpreting market, on the other. The often low quality of speech produced by delegates who have to intervene in a non-native language, “with a vast range of accents and speech patterns imported from their own language” (Donovan 2017: 106) as well as “restricted power of expression” (Albl-Mikasa 2014: 26), have obvious implications for the efforts required by interpreters to decipher speech input and, probably, for the quality of their output too. This may be demotivating in itself. But as pointed out by Donovan (2017: 106), a lack of language diversity in meetings may also deprive interpreters of a major source of motivation, linked to their very raison d’être: to assist in inter-linguistic exchange. More serious, perhaps, are the implications of ELF for demand and market situation. In a 2010 survey of 32 conference interpreters, 69 per cent reported a decrease in the number of assignments due to an increase in English-only meetings, and 40 per cent expressed fears of demand dropping in the future (Albl-Mikasa 2010). A wealth of unsolicited comments to the same effect are reported in Gentile’s survey (2016). As one respondent put it: “the private market is shrinking, and we often have to interpret treasurers congratulating themselves on how much money they have saved by not recruiting interpreters and conducting meetings in English” (Gentile 2016: 369). It is easy to see how the spread of ELF and the shrinking market connects with complaints about increased competition over jobs and pressure on working conditions and remuneration levels.

In the context of occupational prestige, it is worth noting that the spread of English as a lingua franca affects the status determinant of perceived importance/value to society and, partially, that of (recognition of) specialized skills. The more foreign-language mastery becomes a common asset, the less importance we can expect society to attach to the services of interpreters and to recognize, and pay for, their specialized (language) skills (Dam & Zethsen 2013: 252-254). This will inevitably detract from the profession’s prestige. From a professionalization perspective, we may note that the spread of ELF operates directly on the decisive force in the professionalization of conference interpreting in the last millennium: demand. The profession came into being because of a new demand, originating in post-war multilateralism and multilingualism. The widespread monolingualism of present-day international meetings drives demand down. In a market situation characterized by the absence of any monopoly, ELF can therefore legitimately be seen as a threat to the profession as we came to know it in the second half of the twentieth century and, in the most pessimistic of interpretations, possibly even as a force of de-professionalization. On a more optimistic note, the spread of ELF can alternatively be viewed as a driver of a much-needed redefinition of the profession, as will be discussed further down.

New technologies

The topic of new technology (see Fantinuoli, Chapter 36, in this volume) generates mixed feelings among interpreters, but overall it commands a great deal of pessimism. Interpreters generally acknowledge the immense usefulness of the many electronic devices and tools that have become part of their everyday routine in what has come to be labelled ‘computer-aided-interpreting’ (Fantinuoli 2018; Kalina & Ziegler 2015), though there are also voices of concern over the many “new technologies to learn and use” (Gentile 2016: 355). A major but still
distant threat is regarded as coming from technology that could eventually replace human interpreters, i.e. fully automated machine interpreting. This technology is still in its infancy, but advances have been too impressive for it “to be ignored as ridiculously error-prone” (Pöchhacker 2019: 55). Interpreters do worry, as shown in Gentile’s research: “we are a dying breed, like typists—by my retirement age, I suppose we stop to exist with the amazing new advances in technology” (Gentile 2016: 365). As in the case of ELF, full or partial implementation of machine interpreting could potentially have far-reaching consequences for demand and thus for the very foundation of the profession, with derived effects for competition, fees and working conditions. This concern remains diffuse, however. The third component of technologization, remote interpreting, is much more real.

Remote interpreting (see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume) has been referred to as ‘the second revolution’ in conference interpreting, after the simultaneous revolution in the twentieth century (Baigorri-Jalón 1999). It still has not replaced on-site interpreting but it is expanding and has sparked heated debate as well as research in recent decades (e.g. Moser-Mercer 2003; Mouzourakis 2006; Roziner & Shlesinger 2010; Seeber et al. 2019). Overall, research has found a discrepancy between objective measurements (e.g. of quality and stress) and interpreters’ subjective reports of increased strain and fatigue when interpreting in the remote mode. Beyond technical obstacles, studies report feelings of discomfort in interpreters as well as a sense of alienation resulting from a lack of immersion and proximity to main stakeholders, and leading to a lack of motivation. This is echoed in the open comments supplied by the respondents in Gentile’s survey: “I fear there will be ever more video conferences, so less and less direct contact with our customers—which makes the job much less motivating” (Gentile 2016: 356). Donovan (2017), too, reports that this development has not been welcomed by interpreters, whose job satisfaction is linked to a sense of proximity. There is, however, no reason to believe that the situation is any different in other professions, where distance work has become the order of the day too, a development which has been accentuated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, in interpreting and beyond.

Interpreter motivation and job satisfaction notwithstanding, remote interpreting has evident implications for occupational prestige as it detracts considerably from the status determinant of visibility (for a discussion of the concept of visibility in a status context, see Dam & Zethsen 2013). On the other hand, remote interpreting—and all the other new technologies designed to aid (human) interpreting and interpreters—could, in fact, operate in favour of professionalization and prestige, as will be discussed in the following section.

**Insights and prospects**

As we have seen, the status of conference interpreters has undergone several changes in their short history of existence. Changes in status have run parallel to the introduction of new technologies and the development of the profession. The first conference interpreters of the *interbellum* period enjoyed an exceptionally high status as natural-born stars working in high-prestige settings and for high-profile clients. In the second half of the twentieth century, stardom was traded for professional status—resulting in an immediate loss of prestige, which was, however, recovered as professionalization progressed, at unprecedented speed. The situation today is ambivalent. Traces of the glamorous image of the pioneers remain and in fact compete with the depiction of conference interpreters as highly trained, skilled and paid professionals—the unquestioned elite among language professionals. At the same time, the field shows signs of de-professionalization due to the loss of the regulatory power of AIIC, market fragmentation and the spread of ELF and new technologies. This combination of factors has generated a
vicious circle: in a situation of dwindling demand, mainly due to ELF, competition increases and fees decrease, notably when the professional body lacks monopoly, full control over access to the market and powers to determine and sanction fees and working conditions. In turn, a situation of low(er) fees and perhaps less favourable working conditions may in fact exclude members of professional associations from the market in a process of adverse selection (Pym et al. 2013), precisely because membership requires compliance with associations’ guidelines—no matter whether they come in the shape of rules or recommendations. Against this backdrop, looking at conference interpreting through the lens of the power approach to professions provokes highly illuminating: like any professional group, conference interpreters can be seen to struggle for power and be in constant conflict with other groups over issues of boundaries, clients and resources.

However, there is a silver lining in this apparently gloomy picture. For one thing, there is a lesson to be learnt from history. Just as the simultaneous mode was looked at with suspicion at first but successfully embraced thereafter, so too would twenty-first-century interpreters be well advised to actively embrace new interpreting modes and technologies. We concur with Fantinuoli (2018: 8) that interpreters should reap the benefits of technology and take an active role in shaping the technological transformation, rather than greeting it with scepticism or aversion. Technology-intensive jobs require experts equipped with the technical skills to navigate them. As we saw above, expertise and specialist skills are central components of both occupational prestige and professionalization. As for the much resented technology of remote interpreting, it has the huge advantage of reducing the costs of interpreting, increasing its accessibility and, in all likelihood, the demand. So just as the first technological revolution of simultaneous interpreting gave birth to the much-admired new profession, the second technological revolution of remote interpreting could usher in a new era of increased demand for highly specialized, technology-savvy language professionals. The new demand, however, is not likely to originate from the sectors that came to be conference interpreters’ playground in the twentieth century.

With the spread of English as a lingua franca and the increase in global migration, the twenty-first century has seen a relocation of multilingualism and language mediation. Conferences have become largely monolingual (or bilingual), but language barriers and language-mediation needs have evidently not disappeared. Multilingualism has, so to speak, moved from the conference rooms of international business, politics and science to the public-service institutions of individual countries, and the demand for interpreters has moved with it. Some conference interpreters may resist the idea of changing or diversifying their professional activities to community interpreting. Such a move could not only be seen as a blow to their well-defined and hard-earned professional identities as conference interpreters; it would also entail a shift to less prestigious work settings. However, the prestige they may lose by entering a new work context, they may gain on another parameter: the perceived importance of their work and its value to society. As we saw above, this is a status determinant per se, and the crucial work of interpreters in high-stakes settings such as hospitals and courts undoubtedly qualifies as important. In fact, some interpreters who self-identify as conference interpreters have already responded to the current challenge of relocated multilingualism and taken up work in public service institutions: more than one-third of the conference interpreter respondents (38 per cent) in Gentile’s 2016 survey stated that they had done this. AIIC has followed suit and now reaches out to interpreters beyond the conference scene, actively embracing court interpreters and interpreters in conflict zones.

This diversification mirrors wider developments on the job market. Today, many companies, organizations and language service providers seek to recruit multilingual communication
specialists to perform not only interpreting and translation but also broader language and communication tasks that require not only extensive use of technology but also the ability to straddle between two or more professions, e.g. the interpreter/translator-journalist, the interpreter/translator-web manager, the interpreter/translator-marketing expert (Besznyák, Szabó & Fischer 2020). In this landscape of hybridization and blurring professional boundaries, there are essentially two options available to conference interpreters who are facing a shrinking market: the specialist and the generalist route. The specialist route has conference interpreters diversifying within their core discipline, reaching out to interpreting jobs beyond the conference scene. The generalist route implies diversifying into new areas of work. The choice of route inevitably lies with the individual conference interpreter. From a status perspective, however, the former option is more attractive as it allows practitioners to preserve and hone their specialist (interpreting) skills, a core component of both professionalization and occupational status. Pending individual choices, it is impossible to say where the conference interpreting profession will head in the future. Provided it continues to be a distinctive (sub-)profession within the larger field of multilingual communication, our guess is that it may eventually strip off one of its attributes and simply become the interpreting profession.

Further reading


References


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