Historical developments in conference interpreting

An overview

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The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.

Oscar Wilde 1891: 162

Introduction

Conference interpreting has been defined broadly as “the rendering of speeches delivered in one language into another at formal and informal conferences and in conference-like settings” (Diriker 2015: 78), where two or more languages (including signed) are used and live translation, either consecutive or simultaneous (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume), is provided. Those settings can be traced back to a remote past, although the profession as we know it today is mainly a product of the twentieth century through a process of increasing regulation and recognition of qualifications by interpreters themselves and by their social milieu.

Having said that, if we assume that ‘conference settings’ include interlinguistic and intercultural communication among individuals or groups representing different positions and interests at negotiation ‘tables’, professionalized interpreting, with highly sophisticated codes of ethics, has existed for centuries in different societies. This reality has been generally ignored due to the Western (mostly Eurocentric) approach that has broadly characterized the definition of the contours of the profession in the last century or so, and also to the lack of historical research on the interpreting profession, at least until recent times. The history of interpreting is built every day and any interpreting activity may be approached from a particular historical perspective, which is built socially but predicated individually. Readers of this Handbook surely belong to geographical zones or political entities with various historical narratives framed in chronologies which do not fit exactly into the conventional Western periodization. We assume that analysing the historical dimension of issues involved in the heritage of our predecessors is a complex and still unfinished task.
As an introductory caveat, we believe it is important to distinguish between the history of the practice of conference interpreting, which we may consider as belonging to the history of multilingual relations of many types, and the history of its path towards a fully-fledged profession, although both perspectives may intersect in the historical account.

Sociological research applied to Translation Studies focuses on the agents and their activities through the social practices in the fields where they are generated (Inghilleri 2005). The intrinsic relationship that interpreting has with key human experiences such as war, commerce and diplomacy results in the plurality of missions, physical settings and national contexts that high-profile interpreters have fulfilled throughout history. As is well known, the presence of interpreting diplomats and diplomat interpreters is well documented in interpreting history (Fernández-Sánchez 2019; Harris 2002; Lung 2011; Roland 1999; Torikai 2009). For several centuries in the southernmost frontier of the Spanish Empire, the Hispanic-Mapuche conferences known as parlamentos were held regularly, using the services of interpreters, whose presence attests to the political importance given to linguistic sovereignty of both parties (Payás 2020). The history of dragomans in the Ottoman Empire attests to the long tradition of diplomatic interpreters in the negotiations with the Sublime Porte, an exchange which prompted the early creation of schools of interpreters, such as the ones established at different dates in Venice (Rothman 2011), Paris (Balliu 2008), Vienna (Wolf 2015) or Madrid (Cáceres Würsig 2012), as well as of other training programmes, such as those in the German Empire Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Wilss 1999) or in the US Department of State (Sawyer 2016).

This opening chapter intends to offer a historical overview of the most highly professionalized domain among the interpreting professions, even if discussion on that recognition is still open for certain scholars (Dam & Korning Zethsen 2013). The sociological perspective involved in our aim to describe the professionalization of conference interpreting comes from its beginnings at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and then at the first international organizations in the 1920s and 1930s, such as the League of Nations, where an international staff interpreters’ corps was established. The use of interpreting at international conferences, in consecutive mode at that time, paved the way for the consolidation of the profession as an essential part of multilingual international relations in the twentieth century. Pioneer conference interpreters met the difficult challenges of adjusting themselves to the cognitive, ethical and technical complexity of the interpreting activity and resolving the intricacies of international and multicultural gatherings in the interwar period and after the Second World War. The Nuremberg War Crimes Trial in 1945 was an extraordinary event in many ways, including for the practice of interpreting. The use of the simultaneous interpreting mode in the Nuremberg Trial (Gaiba 1998), tested since the late 1920s especially at the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Communist International (Comintern), resulted in a new professional identity in the context of the international organizations and institutions established after the Second World War.

Their practice in the international organization sector granted interpreters a high professional standing, as happened under the League of Nations. Recent research on the issue of status has observed the evolution of a normative role and idealized professional recognition (“splendid interpreters”, Roland 1999; “virtuosos”, Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger 2008; “the stars of the translation profession”, Dam & Korning Zethsen 2012, 2013) to a more realistic professional identity according to the variety of settings and user expectations in a changing world. The emergence of other types of professional interpreting at the end of the twentieth century, such as community or sign language interpreting, as well as the increasing use of interpreting in conflict zones and new technological challenges, have also contributed to broaden the scope
of interpreting settings and to develop new research interests and approaches among conference interpreters (Angelelli 2004; Fitchett 2012; Kahane 2009).

**Historical landmarks**

The 1920s witnessed a growing demand for interpreters for international conferences, whose number increased as a result of geopolitical and technological changes. The rise of English in diplomacy began in the aftermath of the First World War. During the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the United States and the United Kingdom leaders insisted on using their own language and not French, which notwithstanding its status as *de facto* ‘lingua franca’ of diplomacy for the previous two centuries they did not command.

In the British Commonwealth, the number of international organizations and conferences had increased dramatically during the period 1920–1946 (Hankey 1946), as a means to put an end to war through peaceful solution of disputes among States. Multilingual conferences gained weight again after the Second World War, encompassing not just political but also scientific and cultural matters, mainly in Western Europe, but also in the USSR.

Given the circumstances, the fledging interpreting profession found support from the staff interpreter corps established at the League of Nations, as part of an international civil service, and from a small group of freelance part-time interpreters, the likes of, for example, Antoine Velleman or Gustav Camerlynck, backed by solid academic underpinnings and high linguistic standards, who negotiated their working conditions on an individual basis, inspired on their part by their colleagues at the League and the ILO. That small group faced an increasing demand in a self-regulatory market and they were responsible for some of the improvements in pay and working conditions in the Geneva organizations, whose tentacles spread to other Western European cities. The conditions they negotiated included paid preparation time, travel expenses and *per diem*. With hindsight, they led an in-grouping process which resulted in significant changes towards the consolidation of the profession. As an illustration of that era, interpreters recruited for the first ILO conference in Washington in 1919 were paid first-class tickets by sea to travel from Britain to Washington via New York. Travel time was considered as working time, and in fact it did facilitate the interpreters’ preparation of the conference, sharing knowledge with colleagues during several days and learning from their contact with delegates attending the same event. Sanz (1930) refers to the travelling opportunities for Geneva-based interpreters in the 1920s to places such as Paris, London, Amsterdam, Rome and even Madrid as bonuses which satisfied their presumed wanderlust.

The League of Nations had an officially bilingual regime (English and French) and used mostly consecutive interpreting during the 1920s and 1930s, while the ILO, the other post-First World War Geneva institution, responded in its conferences to demands for other languages, mostly from workers’ trade unions, and resorted to experiments in simultaneous interpreting as a means to provide wider multilingualism and a stronger democratization of international conversation. It was at the ILO where simultaneous interpreting was tested in 1925 and 1926 and where the first course on this modality was organized in 1928, so as to recruit interpreters for that year’s conference (Baigorri-Jalón 2014).

Only a few months after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the establishment of the Geneva institutions, the 1st Comintern Congress was held in Moscow (March 1919), which included in its machinery a corps of professional translators and interpreters. Faced with similar problems to those encountered by the Geneva institutions, it also established a Translation Bureau (July 1919) (Chernov 2016: 137–138). Language difficulties in the conduct of the 2nd Comintern Congress deliberations (1920) prompted the creation in 1921 of
a Commission to introduce Esperanto and soon after to approach the matter by studying the option of telephone technology to carry out simultaneous interpreting (Chernov 2016: 140). The ‘Soviet’ interpreting apparatus was conceived by V.Z. Epshtein, further improved by Isaac Goron, and it was used in the 6th Comintern Congress, almost in parallel with the 1928 ILO Conference (Chernov 2016: 141–145). Much as it happened in the West, Soviet interpreters’ working conditions improved between the 1928 Comintern Congress, where a Party maximum wage was applied, and the 6th KIM (Communist International of the Youth) Congress in 1935, when “a very generous rate of 55 rubles per day” (the average wage of a Russian worker in 1935 was 170 rubles a month) was allocated to interpreters (Wollenberg 1936, cited in Chernov 2016: 161–162). The early Soviet steps in conference interpreting show again the multilinear nature of the history of our profession and also the higher proportion of female interpreters in the early ranks of the interpreting teams in the Soviet Union.

The Nuremberg trial meant the dress rehearsal of simultaneous interpreting. Colonel Dostert was instrumental in setting up the simultaneous interpreting system at Nuremberg and at the United Nations. He was also capable enough to recruit and to hastily train the interpreters before the trial. Just a few interpreters who served in Nuremberg came from interpreting schools, where only the consecutive mode was taught. The rest did not have any specific training in interpreting and most of them were very young, but they were all talented, flexible and strong enough to face the challenge. Dostert took five of those pioneers to New York to test the Filene-Finlay SI system at the United Nations as early as April 1946: Elisabeth Heyward, Yuri Khlebnikov, Evgenia Rosoff, Ina Telberg and Georges Vassilchikov. They facilitated the simultaneous interpreting transfer from an international military court to an international organization.

The military trial set the precedent not only in international justice but also in the use of interpreting at other international military tribunals at that time, such as the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal in post-war Japan (1946–1948). However, the use of interpreting differed enormously in both trials. Consecutive interpreting was the preferred mode in Tokyo, ignoring or overlooking that SI had been used for Japanese at the ILO in 1928, and “there was no Japanese counterpart of Colonel Léon Dostert” (Takeda 2010: 18), but, even so, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) can be considered a precursor to conference interpreting in Japan (see Takeda & Matsushita, Chapter 12, in this volume).

Most of the Japanese interpreters after the Tokyo Trial returned to their prior jobs and almost none of them became a professional interpreter. Takeda concludes that in Japan “there was no linear development of the profession of interpreting equivalent to the development of simultaneous conference interpreting from Nuremberg to the United Nations and beyond” (2010: 148). Likewise, only a few interpreters from Nuremberg pursued a career in interpreting after the trial (Baigorri-Jalón 2014).

To conclude these notes on historical landmarks, the use of simultaneous interpreting both at the ILO and the Comintern allowed for the democratization of those multilingual and multifaceted fora. These examples from different geographical zones illustrate the multilinear nature of interpreting historical evolution and the role played by translation and interpreting in making world history.

**Professionalization and institutionalization**

Professionalization is a social process that involves “the social and symbolic construction of occupation and status” (Siegrist 2001: 12154). The process of professionalization involves both the development of skills and specific knowledge and the development of identities, norms,
credentials and values associated with becoming part of a professional group and acquiring a social status (Diriker 2004) (see also Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume).

The first steps in pursuing the institutionalization of the profession can be identified in the early 1950s with the publication by Jean Herbert of his Manuel de l’interprète (1952), the founding of AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence/International Association of Conference Interpreters) in 1953 (Keiser 2004), and the blooming of training institutions, after precedents in Moscow (1930–1933, and then 1942), Mannheim (1930), and then Heidelberg (1933), Geneva (1941), Vienna (1943), and, in association with Allied initiatives, Innsbruck (1945), Graz (1946), Mainz/Germersheim (1947), Saarbrücken (1948), Paris (1948) and Washington (1949) (Sawyer & Roy 2015).

The very highly specialized setting of the conference room wields a lot of control over professional work to the extent that those high demands are a defining trait of the profession. Consequently, its development has been guided from the initial stages by the challenge of attaining the highest professional quality, which in turn entailed recognition and status. Thus, the issue of aptitude for interpreting (see Russo, Chapter 23, in this volume) has been a recurrent topic from early academic research (Sanz 1930) until recently (Pöchhacker & Liu 2014), and an issue which has attracted the attention of AIIC since its foundation in 1953 (AIIC 1965; 2013/2019).

The founding of AIIC was due to the vision of pioneer conference interpreters, such as Constantin Andronikof, André Kaminker and Hans Jacob, in establishing “an association for all professional interpreters, staff and free-lance, that should be worldwide (which at the time sounded to many completely illusory)” (Thiery 2016). According to Thiéry, a circular signed by those interpreters in December 1951, which specified its commitment to defend and promote the interests and prestige of the profession, led to the founding of the first international association of the profession on November 11, 1953 at UNESCO in Paris.

From the very beginning, the AIIC has been “the most influential norm-setting in the field” (Keiser 2004; Thiéry 2015), in the standardization of the practice (AIIC Basic Texts ‘Standards’) and in laying down a Code of Ethics with the basic principles of integrity, professionalism and confidentiality, which all AIIC members are bound to respect in their work. In that sense, it has contributed to maintain pervasively the dominant image of the uninvolved conference interpreter which is an abstraction or “a default standard” (Gile 2017: 241), widely accepted in the profession (but see Albl-Mikasa 2020).

An outstanding feature which should be emphasized is the increasing feminization process in the profession, which ran parallel to the development of AIIC. Very few female interpreters were registered in the League of Nations/ILO system during the 1920s and 1930s, while they were more numerous in the ranks of the Comintern. UN figures show that female staff interpreters have increased from around 20 per cent in 1950, a similar ratio to that at Nuremberg, to approximately 30 per cent in 1970 and around 50 per cent in 2000 (Baigorri-Jalón 2003). In 2006, the ratio in the AIIC was around 3 to 1, with 2,186 female members vs. 736 men (Diriker 2013: 368).

It is very difficult to make a clear distinction between institutional knowledge and professional practice in the development of the profession of conference interpreting. The pioneer practitioners whose legendary names, mentioned in this chapter, have become a significant part of the profession’s history (Andronikof, Kaminker and Jacob were at a time respectively chief interpreters at the OEEC/OECD, the Council of Europe and UNESCO) were also involved in early training institutions and initiatives (Herbert with his Manuel and dictionaries, Rozan on note-taking) and some of them also in early research projects (Seleskovitch) and in writing their personal memoirs (see, for instance, Andres, Kaindl & Kurz 2017). Some ventured to outline
theoretical proposals, such as those derived from the so-called ‘Paris school’, formulated in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Danica Seleskovitch (Widlund-Fantini 2007), which would prove to be quite influential in the development of the profession and in the interpreting schools curricula (see Gile & Barranco-Droege, Chapter 25, in this volume), marked by the preservation of a key role for the consecutive mode, even many years after it had been overwhelmingly replaced in conference settings by the on-site simultaneous.

The evolution from consecutive to on-site simultaneous interpreting was not an entirely smooth process. It meant equipping conference rooms, speakers and interpreters with headphones and microphones, locating the interpreters in more or less isolated booths to avoid sound interference from interpreters of other languages and from the audience. That brought about an end to direct incoming and outgoing communication (the mediation of technical devices was necessary) and the physical separation of interpreters from their speakers and users (through the mediation of glass panes or eventually soundproof booths). Every technical change in the working conditions has historically entailed a reaction from those engaged in the previous mode. The battle between consecutive and simultaneous practitioners would eventually result in victory for both sides. The simultaneous interpreters were mocked by their consecutive counterparts as téléphonistes, apes and parrots, while they were being joined in the interpreting booths by their critics, but the consecutive interpreters’ ideological and political influence was preserved at the schools, which to this day keep the same model established on the basis of the principle that without proficiency in consecutive, it is not possible to work in simultaneous. The world’s largest employer of interpreters, the EU Directorate General of Interpretation, still recruits its staff interpreters through tests in which consecutive is as decisive as simultaneous (https://epso.europa.eu/career-profiles/languages_en), even if those who pass hardly ever practise the consecutive mode in their professional life.

The profession looking towards the future

The evolution of transport accessibility and travel habits throughout the last hundred years and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in at least the last two decades have had a great impact not only on interpreters’ working conditions but also on the availability of their training resources. The issue of ICTs and interpreting is far from simple. Internet and electronic devices are having a huge impact not only on how we all, interpreters and speakers alike, learn but also on how we carry out our professional activities. Immediacy of communication and access to data has created, among users of interpreting services, expectations of an ever faster mechanical, almost uncanny, process, as if the procedure involved in the alchemy of the linguistic and cultural transfer did not require the agency of the brains (and lungs, larynx, etc.) of increasingly anonymous interpreters, unwittingly considered as machines or robots.

Even if financial or ideological constraints restricted, and still restrict, the number of people able to travel to the countries where other languages were/are spoken, it is undeniable that faster and cheaper communications, better accessibility to language acquisition resources and an increased number of training institutions have contributed to modify the sociological profiles of the new generations of interpreters in many countries. Easier connectivity through easier means of transportation, particularly air travel, has also brought about in recent times the establishment of a wider network of interpreting venues and nodes. It remains to be seen what the impact that the current growing awareness of climate change and carbon footprint will be on the use of remote interpreting as a substitute for frequent air travel to service conferences paradoxically devoted at times to environmental issues or other related topics. Limited mobility, such as the one triggered worldwide by the current COVID-19 pandemic, means fewer direct
face-to-face contacts and a decreasing demand for on-site interpreters, with consequences still difficult to assess.

Interpreters who worked from the 1960s to the 1990s were sure of their command of technical equipment in most conference settings where they were called to act. Nowadays, information and other technologies evolve at a very fast pace, creating new training and practising demands for interpreters, who need to update their technological abilities in order to familiarize themselves with new sources of information and also with new devices and different working environments, working schedules, etc. (see Fantinuoli, Chapter 36, in this volume).

Concerning technological change, remote interpreting started to be used, after early experiments at the United Nations in the late 1970s, with a similar set-up as on-site simultaneous, with increasingly improved audio-visual technology for users and interpreters, which allowed for better sound quality and the provision of images from the setting where the actual meeting was happening, including at times the speaker’s close-up image (see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume). Reactions against the use of that mode were similar to the ones experienced when on-site simultaneous was introduced, but this time interpreters were professionally organized and the introduction of the remote mode has been far less sweeping than in situ simultaneous. Another factor that contributes to explain the less clear-cut anticipated success of remote vs. on-site simultaneous interpreting emanates from the great variety of ICTs available now and their constant evolution, which has little to do with the simplicity of the equipment that prevailed when on-site simultaneous was introduced. Over and above the less than general expansion of the remote modality, the onset of ICTs, which goes beyond the specific technical changes in interpreting, has brought about new working environments for interpreters. The impact of those technologies has been felt mostly in the preparation stages of the interpreting tasks rather than in the actual development of the interpreting process. Professional interpreters can now prepare their assignments in a very different way from the methods used in the pre-ICTs era. Instead of filling their briefcases with bulky printed dictionaries or glossaries, they carry light electronic devices containing conference-related documents and dictionaries and allowing for instant external connections at the touch of a key (Donovan 2017).

With the exception of the European Union in some of its meetings and the national parliaments in countries, such as Switzerland, Belgium or Canada or Spain’s regional parliaments in Catalan-speaking regions, the Basque country or Galicia, not every participant can use the language they wish, but rather a limited number of options (six official languages in the United Nations since Arabic was added, three at the World Trade Organization, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the ILO, the International Telecommunication Union, etc.). That means that a varying proportion of participants in their meetings need to use a foreign language, often English, which nowadays has become the hyper-central language for communication in the world languages constellation (de Swaan 2001). Since English is increasingly used as a lingua franca by speakers who have it as B or C language, the need for an English booth or even the need for interpreters at all is put into question (Albl-Mikasa 2014; see also Albl-Mikasa, Chapter 39, in this volume). It also puts into question the delicate issue of quality: for non-native English speakers it may be easier to understand that Globish version of English than the flowery shades and nuances of a higher literary register provided by a native English speaker, including if that person is the interpreter. This issue poses problems to training institutions as to how best prepare their graduates for the market, for instance, as far as training their language B is concerned.

Summing up so far, in this chapter we have tried to briefly shed light on the development of interpreting practices on their path to professionalization. We said at the beginning that the
history of interpreting is written every day. We call interested readers to continue with the
task of adding new chapters to the narrative of the conference interpreting profession. Every
scholarly initiative, including that of professional historians, who are increasingly interested
in understanding international and intercultural relationships by inquiring about the mediation
processes, will be welcome by the future generations of interpreters.

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