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Diplomatic conference interpreting

Barry Slaughter Olsen, Henry Liu and Sergio Viaggio

Introduction

Diplomatic interpreters are often found centre-stage, standing at the shoulder of presidents, prime ministers or even kings. Because of this, they are often considered, at least by the general public, to represent the pinnacle of the interpreting profession. Despite the fact that diplomatic interpreting is one of the oldest settings, as pointed out by Thiéry (2015: 107), the general public’s conception of diplomatic interpreting, at least in the Western or more precisely European context, often revolves around the novel use of simultaneous interpreting at the Nuremberg trials (Baigorri-Jalón 2014a; Gaiba 1998). This landmark event serves as a microcosm of diplomatic interpreting today, which often places interpreters in legal, political, and military contexts. The trials involved many nations. They were brought about by a military conflict that ensued when political and diplomatic relations failed. Indeed, no other subspecialty of interpreting is more influenced by politics than diplomatic interpreting. Hence an alternative title to this chapter could be political interpreting. Diplomatic interpreting is also, as Baigorri-Jalón (2010) points out, on many occasions very close to military interpreting (see The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial, Gaiba, 1998).

For the purposes of this chapter, we will define diplomatic interpreting as a special type of conference interpreting provided to sovereign governments and intergovernmental organisations, whether in consecutive or simultaneous mode. This is a broad definition by design. As this chapter will show, what constitutes diplomatic interpreting, who provides it, and how it is provided vary greatly, depending on a complex set of factors.

In this chapter we will divide our attention between diplomatic interpreters working for sovereign governments and those working in/for intergovernmental organizations (see also Graves, Pascual Olaguibel & Pearson, Chapter 8, and Ruiz Rosendo & Diur, Chapter 9, in this volume), focusing on a number of issues like the often mythical pathway of becoming a diplomatic interpreter and some specific issues more pertinent though not necessarily unique to this area of interpreting, like interpreting into B language and the intersection with media interpreting (see Sandrelli, Chapter 6, and Falbo, Chapter 7, in this volume).

Contrary to what the title of this volume suggests, this chapter will also briefly cover aspects of diplomatic interpreting outside of the conference setting, as both types of diplomatic
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interpreting discussed in this chapter include not only one-on-one consecutive interpreting but also interviews, chuchotage (whispered interpreting) especially during negotiations, touring liaison interpreting, phone and video interpreting, as well as relay interpreting for rarer and/ or indigenous languages. Admittedly, these aspects are more common in the sovereign government setting which includes a significant proportion of all types of diverse communicative events.

Finally, for obvious reasons, there is significant secrecy surrounding diplomatic interpreting, and as a consequence there is very limited publicly available material for research. Therefore, a significant part of this chapter is based on the collective experience of the authors and their conversations with their counterparts and colleagues. But it is encouraging to see increased interest in a body of emerging literature and research, for instance, Baigorri-Jalón & Fernández-Sánchez (2010), Torikai (2009) or Roland (1999). Over the years, a number of interviews with and personal memoirs written by individual diplomatic interpreters, such as van Reigersberg (Kelly 2019), Palazchenko (2010), Obst (2010), Berezhkov (1994) and Birse (1967) have also been published.

Becoming a diplomatic interpreter

Sovereign governments

Prior to penning this chapter, the authors conducted a non-exhaustive informal survey of high-level diplomatic interpreters across all continents. We chose this format, based on face-to-face and e-mail conversations, as a formal survey of this type would most likely not yield any substantial answers, given the confidential nature of diplomacy. We do not claim to have any statistically valid findings, but rather observational and anecdotal findings as a result of these conversations. One of the things this survey yielded was that there is no universal pathway to becoming a diplomatic interpreter for one’s country.

Although some countries do maintain a team of full-time diplomatic interpreters, in many countries, they are staff diplomats first and foremost and secondarily trained as interpreters, whereas in others, particularly for smaller nations, diplomatic interpreters are often freelancers with various backgrounds in addition to being professional interpreters (see below). This is often the case for less frequently used language pairs due to the ad hoc nature of interactions requiring these languages. Another not uncommon pathway of entry is via the military or intelligence services.

Selection criteria for diplomatic interpreters for sovereign governments vary from country to country as much as the form of government does. Some countries may require a formal civil servant-type examination, while others may include a formal interpretation skills and abilities test and in others still a personal introduction may suffice. In some countries, party or ideological affiliation may also play a role in the career path of a diplomatic interpreter (Liao & Pan 2018, see also Dawrant, Wang & Jiang, Chapter 15, this volume).

For security and loyalty reasons, each country has its own internal policy and selection criteria in appointing diplomatic interpreters, both ad hoc and as permanent staff. While some countries conduct a formal examination (e.g. The Office of Language Services of the United States Department of State) ¹, based on the authors’ experience, most do not. Regardless, freelance independent contract interpreters are normally subject to rigorous background checks and often assigned a specific security clearance level, with those with the highest level assigned to interpreting for cabinet-level officials and heads of state. Furthermore, many embassies employ interpreters either as staff (often combined with translation tasks or, as stated above,
diplomats with interpreter training), or as freelancers for different missions. Interpreters working for embassies are typically vetted in a similar way as the embassy staff.

To sum up, diplomatic interpreters for sovereign governments are a heterogeneous group, with a vast variety of backgrounds and skills. They are not necessarily the type of interpreter one would find through an interpreting agency or by searching the directory of a professional association.

**Intergovernmental organisations**

The creation of many intergovernmental organisations in the twentieth century gave rise to the need for interpreting in multilateral and multilingual meetings. Originally dominated by consecutive interpreting, which was later largely replaced by simultaneous (see Baigorri-Jalón, Fernández-Sánchez & Payás, Chapter 1, and Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume), interpreting for the bodies of the United Nations, the European Union, and myriad regional organisations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Organization of American States, and the African Union (see Wallmach & Okagbue, Chapter 17, in this volume), have created a significant subspeciality in diplomatic interpreting. The list of intergovernmental and international bodies that employ interpreters is long and varied, as is the pathway to the interpreting booth at each of them. However, in contrast to the sovereign governments’ diplomatic interpreters, these organisations have a more systematised and often transparent way of recruiting interpreters. Many of these institutions, often depending on their size, tend to have more or less standardised entrance tests. Smaller organisations, such as the Organization of American States and the Pan-American Health Organization, employ freelance interpreters, often with a profile similar to the interpreters working for bigger institutions, such as the United Nations (OAS 2009).

Nowadays, most diplomats, high- and medium-level national civil servants, and technocrats understand and can speak English with some degree of fluency. Yet, intergovernmental institutions such as the EU or the UN have extensive interpreting services (see Graves, Pascual Olaguibel & Pearson, Chapter 8, and Rosendo & Diur, Chapter 9, in this volume). The driving force behind this differs between the institutions but is related to a desire to not let language be an obstacle in communications and negotiations. In such settings, multilingualism becomes a political concept, in addition to a practical one. As both the UN and the EU are covered in their own chapters (see reference above), we will only briefly touch upon them directly here. In the daily work and smaller meetings of the intergovernmental institutions, such as the UN, it is a reality that English is the de facto working language. This means that interpreting into the other languages becomes communicatively relevant when people other than diplomats and international civil servants are participating, such as workers’ delegates, some personalities, certain experts, representatives from non-governmental organisations and, above all, individual petitioners, who sometimes do not know any of the official languages of an intergovernmental organisation.

Furthermore, while there is some overlap in terms of the modalities of interpreting used in bilateral and intergovernmental settings, the expectations of the meeting participants regarding the loyalties of the interpreters are very different. In terms of loyalty to the institution and general vetting, interpreters in these organisations, both staff and freelance, tend to be regarded as civil servants with the specific type of civil service ethics demanded from other staff groups.

The EU is the largest employer of translators and interpreters in the world with its 24 official languages (European Parliament n.d.), whereas the UN has 6 official languages with formal...
competitive examinations (see, for instance, Graves, Pascual Olaguíbel & Pearson, Chapter 8, and Rosendo & Diur, Chapter 9, in this volume). NATO has a large number of translators serving the various member states. Although it has only two official languages, English and French, NATO does require the services of interpreters in other languages including Arabic, Dari, Russian and Ukrainian to staff meetings with partner countries, in addition to English and French (NATO n.d.).

While it is mostly true that political affiliations or nationality matter much less in the recruitment of interpreters for these intergovernmental bodies, there is one exception in that no Taiwan nationals have ever been admitted to the Chinese booth at the United Nations since the admission of the People’s Republic of China in 1971, and no Taiwan nationals are currently employed by the UN General Secretariat (United Nations 2020, 9 November).

To conclude, the diplomatic interpreters working at intergovernmental organisations are a more homogeneous group, as the institutions tend to require a certain educational background or the passing of certain entrance tests. Moreover, given the limited number of official languages (2–6) in all international and regional organisations, except the European Union, which, as previously stated, has 24, multilingualism remains limited to a small number of widely spoken world languages. This, in turn, limits both the languages that can be spoken at meetings and the pool of candidates who can work as interpreters for these organisations.

Standards

Although the current trend in translation and interpreting is one of standardisation, be it international (ISO, for example) or national, diplomatic interpreting remains very specific within national or intergovernmental contexts. Consequently, standardisation may pose challenges for diplomatic interpreting between heads of state or in multilateral dialogues when the representatives of the countries in the dialogue have different norms and expectations (e.g. short or long consecutive or the use of chuchotage (whispered interpreting), see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume) than what is typically expected at, for instance, intergovernmental organisations, where a more standardised type of interpreting service (based on the AIIC code of professional ethics and professional standards, see Horváth & Tryuk, Chapter 22, in this volume) is delivered.²

Moreover, communication and negotiation styles vary greatly depending on country, culture and language, and diplomatic interpreting is a tool frequently employed in the exercise in soft power to help negotiate alliances, deescalate tensions, and defend national interests. In this sense, the way a country employs interpreting could be seen as an expression of its culture and sovereignty, further complicating any attempt at standardising the practice of diplomatic interpreting.

Modes and settings in diplomatic interpreting

Diplomatic interpreting has been shaped by the environments in which it is performed. In the multilateral sphere, “[d]iplomatic relations have evolved from secret negotiations to a diplomacy by conference” (Baigorri-Jalón 2014b), as has the interpreting involved in these negotiations. Thiéry (2015), as well as Hlavac and Xu (2020), consider diplomatic interpreting as a subset of conference interpreting since today, the typical setting of a meeting with diplomats is an international conference with representatives of many nations in attendance.

While simultaneous conference interpreting with booths and specialised equipment is the de facto norm in multilateral diplomacy, it is important to note that a significant proportion of interpreting in the diplomatic domain, especially in the sovereign government setting, is
Diplomatic conference interpreting

non-conference, either in the form of chuchotage for a small delegation or one-on-one discussions via consecutive interpreting, telephone interpreting, or videoconference interpreting.

**Sovereign governments**

Interpreting for sovereign governments is most frequently bilingual in nature and performed in both formal and informal contexts. For example, a diplomatic interpreter accompanying a government official on a trip abroad may interpret at meals, receptions, and site visits, and then interpret in formal negotiations and press conferences, all in the same day. The interpreter may also employ short and long consecutive interpreting (with notes) as well as chuchotage and simultaneous with standard interpreting equipment, all in the same day. Working hours may vary greatly as well. Diplomatic interpreters also often work by themselves in these settings.

Finally, when accompanying leaders and dignitaries abroad, interpreters for sovereign governments may be called upon to provide sight translation (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume) of press articles and other written material of importance to the delegation and occasionally be asked to assist with the translation of urgent documents, such as press releases.

**Intergovernmental organisations**

In contrast, diplomatic interpreters working at intergovernmental organisations have a more regimented day with clearly established shifts and meeting durations. Their interpreting assignments are usually made days or weeks in advance. They most frequently work in simultaneous mode in ISO-standard interpreting booths in professionally equipped multilingual conference rooms. It is also standard practice to have access to meeting documents before and during meetings. For these meetings, interpreters work in teams of two or three per language booth and, depending on the target language, may work in only one direction from several source languages such as from English and Spanish into French (see the section on directionality below).

While these distinctions generally hold true, there are exceptions. Diplomatic interpreters for sovereign governments may be assigned to a team to interpret at formal meetings in simultaneous mode, and while less frequent, interpreters at intergovernmental organisations may also be called on to provide consecutive and chuchotage as they accompany dignitaries during missions all over the world.

As a general rule, it is more common for intergovernmental organisations to have dedicated teams of translators who provide written translation services for all meetings. So, it would be very uncommon for interpreters in these organisations to be called upon to translate.

In conclusion, the proportion of diplomatic interpreting across simultaneous and consecutive modes is also geographic and country-dependent and sometimes language-dependent (see below). In countries and language pairs where interpreters receive professional simultaneous training, it is more common to see this mode used in diplomatic interpreting. However, career diplomats who have been trained as interpreters are more likely to work in consecutive and leave simultaneous interpretation to trained conference interpreters. In terms of mode, it is thus safe to say that all modes of interpreting are performed by diplomatic interpreters, although modes may differ depending on country and setting. Furthermore, we can also state that diplomatic interpreting exists where diplomatic meetings exist and covers a wide-array of settings, from institutional conferences with simultaneous interpreting provided in booths, to informal telephone conversations between two heads of state with the interpreter providing short consecutive or chuchotage.
Directionality

Sovereign governments

Directionality is one of the more characteristic aspects of diplomatic interpreting. Whereas the longstanding expectation, at least in Europe and North America, is that professional interpreters interpret from a B or C language into their A language (see e.g. Godijns & Hinderdael 2005), most diplomatic interpreters work bidirectionally and spend most of their time interpreting into their B language, especially in consecutive mode. The only other similar exception is for Sign Language interpreters who predominately interpret into their B language (see Turner, Grbić, Stone, Tester & de Wit, Chapter 38, in this volume).

The reasons most often cited for this choice of interpreting directions are optics (appearance) and loyalty to country. In some instances, what the interpreter looks like may be as important as the message they are conveying and their loyalty more important than their linguistic ability. These considerations often take priority in diplomatic circles, especially given that diplomatic interpreters are often seen at very public events frequently covered by the media. For a head of state, it is often more important to be interpreted by one’s own national interpreter who is seen, and is also seen by others, as a compatriot. The interpreter is frequently by the side of the dignitary, interpreting straight after the diplomat or leader has spoken. For some countries and cultures, it is all the more important that the interpreters have an appearance that matches the national identity and frequently its stereotypes. Furthermore, in some cases and countries, press conferences are well rehearsed question and answer sessions, where the interpreter can prepare the utterances in the B language well in advance and may, in fact, be reading from a pre-translated script. For a discussion on visual considerations and interpreting in press conferences, see Sandrelli, Chapter 6, in this volume.

Another related reason for this choice is that it is often more practical for the interpreter to prepare for the assignment with the leader, as the leader is being briefed by his/her staff (see below). In this case, the interpreter becomes part of the team responsible for projecting the message to the target audience. Whether in peace time or otherwise, it is harder for the diplomatic interpreter of one side to prepare with the leader of the other delegation. This is one of the reasons why two interpreters, one from each side, with the same language combination may be called upon to interpret during a bilateral meeting. Each interpreter is usually working into their non-native language. Logistically speaking, the job could be handled by one interpreter easily, but for reasons of perception and loyalty, no world leader would want to cede their voice to an interpreter employed by and with loyalties to another government.

Furthermore, engaging one’s own interpreter to speak the foreign language in many ways makes sure that the foreign audience receives one’s own narrative, in the way one wants the other party to receive it—a matter of control of narrative (Zheng & Wen 2018). Research also supports how the interpreter is a necessary party in co-creating the narrative during political press conferences (Fu & Chen 2019; Gu 2020; Liao & Pan 2018; Schäffner 2008; Sun 2011).

Intergovernmental organisations

As stated above, with the exception of the Arabic and Chinese booths at the UN, the convention of interpreting into one’s A language is mostly observed. There are also exceptions in rarer and/or regional languages, to which the same rationale behind the Arabic and Chinese booths is applied. Furthermore, in intergovernmental organisations, it is rare that interpreters prepare
or work together with the speakers or delegates. Rather than being seen as part of the team of a particular government, they are a third party engaged by the intergovernmental organisation.

The diplomatic interpreter’s role, neutrality and confidentiality

Sovereign governments

As the volume has a chapter dedicated to ethics and codes (see Horváth & Tryuk, Chapter 21, in this volume), this chapter will only briefly deal with neutrality in relation to specific issues in diplomatic interpreting.

As far as the authors have been able to establish, there is no universal published Code of Ethics for diplomatic interpreters employed by sovereign governments. However, implied in the task of diplomatic interpreting is the notion of loyalty to their own side, similar to military interpreters. Therefore, the notion of neutrality in the context of diplomatic discourse would be rather discordant. Although not stated explicitly, each party in a diplomatic encounter normally brings their own interpreters.

The allegiance to one’s nation while intuitively obvious is, for instance, confirmed on the webpages of different national diplomatic services. For example, the United States Department of State (2021) refers to its interpreters as:

carefully selected, rigorously tested and trained to be the voice and ears of U.S. interlocutors as they represent U.S. government interests by addressing foreign audiences, participating in international conferences, holding discussions with foreign counterparts, negotiating treaties and taking part in any activity where language differences would otherwise be a barrier to communication.

The webpage of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China states that qualified interpreters are required to “resolutely safeguard China’s national interests”, “devote to the motherland’s diplomatic cause with a high sense of mission” and “fight at the forefront of the diplomatic work for the party and country” (Gu 2018: 245). This is further confirmed by the chief interpreter of the Ministry, Zhang Lu, in an address at Beijing International Studies University. He stated that interpreters are “representatives of the whole country and need to convey China’s voice in a comprehensive, accurate and vivid manner” (Gu 2018: 246) with a good command of China’s official stances and policies on sensitive issues (Gu 2018).

Intergovernmental organisations

In this sense, the interpreting staff of intergovernmental organisations are not necessarily seen as diplomatic interpreters (see also Graves, Pascual Olaguibel & Pearson, Chapter 8, and Rosendo & Diur, Chapter 9, in this volume). As employed staff, they are both required to follow their organisation’s code of conduct and the more general code of ethics published by AIIC (see Horváth & Tryuk, Chapter 22, in this volume). Interestingly, the AIIC Code of Ethics does not contain any provisions regarding neutrality or impartiality (Liu 2018). However, the interpreting that they engage in is quintessentially diplomatic. This somewhat paradoxical situation has led to a unique relationship between client and interpreter.

Over the years, many intergovernmental organisations have established a remarkable stability and continuity of bodies, subjects, and participants. This means that the relationships between the interpreters and the organisations, the organisations and the delegates, and the
interpreters and their respective audiences have become somewhat institutionalised as well. Diplomats, experts, and staff participating in the meetings also share the same institutional culture, whereby any other mismatches are left outside the meeting rooms. In addition to their cadre of staff interpreters, intergovernmental organisations tend to rely on the same groups of freelance interpreters, whom they have come to know and trust. Consequently, at any given meeting, most of the interpreting team is already familiar with the subject matter under discussion, the culture of the organisation that has hired them, and the participants representing the various countries in the meeting. Most intergovernmental organisations also include a well-established translation, documentation and reference service that offers invaluable help to interpreters as they prepare for these meetings.

Intergovernmental organisations also assign interpreters to accompany both political groups and human rights groups in the field, where they help with interviews with local authorities, witnesses, and victims, but in such instances consecutive interpretation or chuchotage is usually performed. The same applies to other non-conference settings, such as meetings between high-level government officials and high-level members of an organisation’s leadership.

**Interpreting in multilateral negotiations and drafting of plurilingual agreements**

Both for sovereign governments and intergovernmental organisations, interpreters are crucial when negotiating different agreements. Bilateral or multilateral negotiations on important issues are nearly always facilitated by interpreters. It is thus conceivable that the impact of interpreting on the process of negotiation and subsequently on the final adopted text is not inconsiderable (see Fernandez-Sanchez 2011). However, as the final texts are the work of civil servants and translators, and as negotiations are seldom public, there are no tangible sources to cite the work of interpreters in these processes.

**Diplomatic interpreters in the media**

**Sovereign governments**

There are many examples where diplomatic interpreters are not impartial or self-effacing conduits (discussed, for instance, in Ozolins 2016), but rather acting as politically proactive ‘institutional insiders’ who are keen to act as an ally to their superiors (Sun 2011, see also Kalinin 2019) adapting a ‘semantically neutral’ but ‘pragmatically partial’ role. Both Gu (2018) and Liao and Pan (2018) show an example of what the direct consequence of such an approach could be. When interpreting into Chinese (for the benefit of government officials and often superiors), frictional and confrontational exchanges and messages may even be mitigated by the interpreter, especially at unscripted press conferences. In the case of China, several authors have also shown that the interpreters working in the press conferences for the Chinese government are an integral part of conveying the image of China (Gu 2018; see also Dawrant, Wang & Jiang, Chapter 15, in this volume).

More universally, however, interpreters in political press conferences in particular are often in danger of receiving the blame for breakdowns in the interaction, especially when there are conflicting national interests (Baker 2006). The literature cites numerous examples of this, such as US President Richard Nixon and Japanese prime minister Eisaku Sato’s misunderstanding of whether Japan was ready to enter into a trade deal or when US President Jimmy Carter was interpreted to have a desire for the Polish people (Bumiller 1991). However, this myth
of diplomatic interpreters as news makers, including the most recent incident where US State Department interpreter Marina Gross was pressured by the US Congress to share her notes (Cochrane 2018), has mostly been debunked.

**Intergovernmental organisations**

Interpreters at intergovernmental organisations rarely end up in the media in the same way. During, for instance, press conferences, they are usually secluded in soundproof booths, and participants listen to the interpretation through headphones. Put simply, this difference in spatial organisation may be a reason for the institutional interpreters attracting less attention at press conferences (see Sandrelli, Chapter 6, in this volume).

**Role of technology in diplomatic interpreting**

Diplomacy, by its very nature, is focused on managing relations between countries and governments, relations which are largely based on human relationships. Since diplomatic interpreting is a key supporting role to help maintain these relationships, it has traditionally been a high-touch activity requiring interpreters to be in situ to do their job (see Obst 2010, and Palazchenko 2010). Consequently, diplomatic interpreting has been largely unaffected by the many technological advances of the Internet age, such as web conferencing or speech-to-speech translation. Even so, diplomatic interpreters have long been called upon to interpret phone calls and later video calls between world leaders, usually in consecutive mode because initial telecommunications technologies were not designed to support the multiple audio channels necessary for simultaneous interpreting.

Traditionally, diplomatic interpreters have travelled along with diplomats and world leaders to be wherever their principals were going to meet. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated limitations placed on international travel starting in 2020, diplomatic interpreters had to follow their clients online and adapt to new conditions and ways of conducting diplomacy. This has been true for both interpreters working for sovereign governments and those working for intergovernmental organisations (Kafatos 2020).

The technological developments affecting the practice of diplomatic interpreting can be divided into two main categories: remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI) technologies and artificial intelligence (AI).

**Remote Simultaneous Interpretation (RSI)**

By far, RSI technologies (see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, this volume) have had the largest impact on the practice of diplomatic interpreting in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although RSI was possible long before the pandemic, its use was often resisted by interpreters and diplomats alike. However, as meetings such as the spring and annual meetings of the World Bank, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the many bilateral diplomatic interactions surrounding such meetings were held virtually in 2020, sovereign governments and intergovernmental organisations were forced to adapt and so was diplomatic interpreting (UN Department of Global Communications, n.d.). Of necessity, world diplomacy moved online, and diplomatic interpreters have added this new delivery method to the tried-and-true face-to-face working methods that have been part of their craft for centuries (Kafatos 2021).

To be sure, the hurried switch to online meetings to keep diplomatic relations moving during the pandemic has also led to challenges for interpreters in this sphere, such as poor
sound quality during virtual meetings, the complications of working from home, and the perception of increased fatigue associated with adapting to RSI. However, as has been the case for centuries, diplomatic interpreters will follow their principals and interpret for them whenever or wherever they are needed, this includes existing online forums and those yet to be invented.

**Artificial intelligence (AI)**

Given the broad range of applications of AI to multilingual communication, its potential effects on diplomatic interpreting are many. Even so, while written translation has been revolutionised with the advent of tools such as translation memories and machine translation engines, interpreting has proven a much more complex task to tackle with technology (see Fantinuoli, Chapter 36, in this volume). At the time of writing of this chapter, notable advances in speech recognition, neural machine translation, and speech synthesis in many world languages have occurred. Speech-to-speech translation as a technological task has been solved, even though the end product is frequently imperfect and inaccurate. Nevertheless, intergovernmental organisations are exploring the use of AI to increase access and bring down costs, including automatic subtitle generation in multiple languages and AI-driven real-time speech translation (MultiLingual Staff 2020).

Such developments do not mean, however, that AI will replace diplomatic interpreters any time soon. Diplomatic interpreting is, at its core, high-stakes interpreting. The outcomes of diplomatic negotiations and relationships can have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences on millions of people’s lives. So, the idea of putting complex discussions between world leaders in the hands of even the most advanced AI-powered tools is highly unlikely, given that even the most advanced tools simply crunch data to assess probabilities and provide answers to queries. Unlike diplomatic interpreters who weigh up myriad linguistic, cultural, situational, and political considerations as they speak for their principals, these tools cannot think or feel. And in the world of diplomatic interpreting, nuance, intention, word choice, context, emotion, and many other human factors contribute to a complex form of communication that is still squarely in the hands of highly-skilled human interpreters.

**Future of diplomatic interpreting**

As long as there are diverse languages and national governments, there will be a need for diplomatic interpreting. The need for this type of interpreting ranges from the practical (a simple need to understand one another to communicate) to the symbolic (a national leader speaking in their mother tongue in front of the international media). Interpreters employed by sovereign governments will continue to play an important supporting role in state-to-state diplomacy as long as world leaders insist on speaking in their own languages and there is a need for countries and cultures to understand and interact with one another. In bilateral diplomacy, the array of language combinations required is vast, as is the wide range of topics discussed and types of interactions held. For these reasons, interpreting for sovereign governments will continue to be a diverse and vibrant field of endeavour as the world becomes increasingly interconnected and interdependent.

In contrast, the future of interpreting at intergovernmental organisations is less clear. While the status quo of supporting multilingualism in a limited number of languages is likely to continue, any expansion to include a larger number of official languages is questionable. With the exception of the European institutions, which have continued to expand the number of official
languages as new member countries join (e.g. the European Institutions currently have 24 official languages), the organisations of the UN family and numerous other regional organisations the world over have limited their official languages to six or fewer, and many limit most day-to-day interactions to an even smaller subset of working languages. Moreover, most international and regional organisations have limited or shrinking budgets and expanding mandates. This imperative to do more with less and to increase efficiency has led some to question the principle of multilingualism in multilateral organisations and advocate for using English or another language as a lingua franca (see Albl-Mikasa, Chapter 39, in this volume), particularly for in-house communications and meetings (Kudryavtsev & Ouedraogo 2003). In this light, it is unlikely that multilingualism in these organisations will expand to include other official languages unless significant sources of funding are secured to ensure their support.

Notes
1  www.state.gov/interpreting-information-for-freelance-linguists-ols “Interpreting Information for Freelance Linguists”.
2  https://aiic.org/site/world/about/inside/basic.

Further reading

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