



Book Review

Jesus Baigorri-Jalon (2014). *From Paris to Nuremberg. The birth of conference interpreting* (H. Mikkelson & B. Slaughter Olsen, Trans.) Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins

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DOI: 10.12807/ti.107202.2015.r01

In the late 20th–early 21st centuries, the concept of ‘conference interpreting’ has become almost interchangeable with ‘simultaneous interpreting’. Such a perception results from the declining use of consecutive interpretation in conference settings (Pöchhacker, 2011, p. 309) since the successful launch of simultaneous interpreting during the 1945-6 Nuremberg trials (Gaiba, 1998). While today’s research into conference interpreting is focused on simultaneous interpreting, scarce references to pre-WWII conference interpreting are usually limited to records about interpreters who brilliantly rendered lengthy diplomatic speeches in the consecutive mode. This is why Jesus Baigorri-Jalon’s book *From Paris to Nuremberg. The birth of conference interpreting*, which reconstructs the origins and evolution of conference interpreting in the interwar period, is an important one. Based on archival sources, interviews with interpreters, memoirs and secondary materials, this historical study was originally published in 2000 and has now been translated into English by Holly Mikkelson and Barry Olsen.

The author sets the scene at the Paris Peace Conference, where the American and British leaders challenged French as a universal *lingua franca* of diplomacy (Chapter 1 *The Paris Peace Conference of 1919*). Following the introduction of bilingual proceedings, a small corps of ‘spontaneous interpreters’ (p. 27) – bilingual or multilingual WWI army officers, academics and other professionals (lawyers, journalists) – were recruited for the Paris Peace Conference. These first conference interpreters adapted their skills to suit the delegates’ needs: *long consecutive*, mainly with notes, was developed to interpret state leaders’ speeches in plenary sessions, *short consecutive* without notes was used during less formal negotiations, and *chuchotage* served on some occasions for individual listeners; documents would be rendered by sight translation. Interpreters set their own standards: they aimed to reproduce speeches as faithfully as possible by creating the same impressions as the original (p. 43). However, bilingual speakers (Clémenceau, Lloyd George) monitored the interpretation – pointing out errors, rightly or wrongly, and disagreeing on the interpretation of cultural references, and on whether interpreters (T.E. Lawrence among them) should tone down speakers’ strong statements to maintain diplomatic decorum (pp. 50-51). Interpreters’

physical needs and delivery suffered from poor acoustics, lack of regular breaks, fatigue (especially during *chuchotage*), and the comprehension difficulties of non-native speakers (pp. 46-50).

These approaches were maintained in the international organisations that stemmed from the Paris Peace Conference, primarily the League of Nations (LON) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). As discussed in Chapter 2 *The splendour of consecutive interpreting, the interwar period*, the LON agreed on French and English for their ‘top-hat’ diplomacy (p. 61) while the ILO with its less formal setting and more democratic monolingual membership adopted languages on demand. The notion of splendour refers to the unparalleled visibility of the consecutive interpreters who delivered state leaders’ speeches from a rostrum for most of the sessions (pp. 109-112), and their inexplicable gift of fluently and eloquently interpreting long speeches with or without note taking, leading to the belief that ‘interpreters are born, not made’. Interpreting was then seen as an art and a marvel rather than a profession (pp. 32-34).

However, recruitment and working conditions were mostly treated as professional. Candidates were selected on the basis of a translation test and references: they had to possess excellent linguistic, general-cultural and specialised knowledge, and psychological and physical aptitude (p. 74). While not translators per se, interpreters had to do some translating and précis writing, and provide the translation of speeches for the record and the media. Staff interpreters’ remuneration was on par with other professional levels. Yet working conditions were unregulated: free-lance interpreters negotiated their own payment, and working hours were unlimited, running late into the night during annual conferences. Poor acoustics remained a challenge to interpreters’ comprehension and the background noise from chatting delegates made interpreters strain their voices. On the positive side, it was recognised that interpreters need subject matter familiarity and preparation (p. 117).

The length of the meetings resulting from consecutive interpretation and other inconveniences encouraged a search for alternative interpreting solutions. Chapter 3 *The birth of simultaneous interpretation* dispels the common belief that simultaneous interpreting was first introduced during the 1945-6 Nuremberg trials. In fact, in 1924 the Boston entrepreneur Edward Filene (p. 134) foresaw that simultaneous interpreting with equipment would save time, allow delegates to participate in debates as they unfolded, and make meetings more dynamic. British engineer Gordon Finley developed the equipment, which was supplied by IBM (p. 160). Further tests articulated the pre-conditions to make ‘telephonic interpretation’ work: it required perfect acoustics, the two languages had to have similar grammatical structure, and the speaker had to employ moderately-paced grammatically correct sentences (pp. 136-7). Unprecedentedly, in-house training was made a precondition to allow trainees with aptitude to improve by practising in an authentic setting. The testing fine-tuned working conditions by limiting interpretation length to 30 minutes, and speeches were provided in advance (pp. 147-8).

Despite technical imperfections (lack of sound proofing, voice interference) and quality-related criticisms (‘words’ being translated rather than meaning, lack of expressiveness of consecutive interpreting, speakers unable to correct errors), this ‘telephonic interpreting’ was found to be accurate. Unfortunately, its delivery through technical equipment created the misconception that it was mechanical in nature. While the ILO adopted telephonic interpreting, the LON found it inconceivable to have ministers wear headphones while interpreters were reluctant to lose their high visibility and associated status.

At the same time, the secret diplomacy among dictators (Franco, Hitler, Stalin), their ministers (Göring, Molotov), and heads of democratic states (Churchill, Roosevelt) also required high quality interpreting. Reconstructed in Chapter 4 *The interpreters of the dictators*, this interpreting was highly confidential and stressful. While some top-secret mediations were done by diplomats (Soviet ambassador Ivan Maisky), professional interpreters with excellent skills were retained (Pavlov for Stalin, Schmidt for Hitler). Like their conference counterparts, these interpreters worked essentially in consecutive mode in high-level bilateral or multilateral negotiations (1943 Teheran Conference, 1945 Yalta Conference), switching modes to suit the setting: two-directional liaison interpretation at receptions and dinner parties where taking notes was impossible. Providing opinion, writing up the minutes of speeches and acting as a ‘house maid’ could be unexpectedly added to their role. On-call around the clock, they showed endurance and continued to work with no breaks or nourishment, even during official meals. Different speaking styles included Churchill’s English (reluctance to pause between paragraphs), Hitler’s German (clear speech with regular pauses), and Stalin’s Russian (easy for the Soviet interpreter Berezhkov, accented and inaudible for the British Major Birse). Reproducing their dictator’s speeches as a faithful echo, interpreters were rewarded by being appointed to official non-interpreting positions; however, they could fall from grace as unexpectedly as they came to it (Berezhkov), or pay for their loyalty after their dictator’s downfall (Schmidt).

Despite interpreters’ assertions that the quality of simultaneous interpreting was below that of consecutive, growing international interactions demanded functional solutions. Chapter 5 *Simultaneous interpreting coming of age* examines how simultaneous interpreting in the Allies’ four languages was implemented during the Nuremberg trials. Unlike the ‘Oxbridge’ educated, upper-middle class LON interpreters, the ones at the Nuremberg came from all walks of life: graduates of the recently founded Ecole de Traduction et d’Interprétation worked with Russian émigrés and Jewish victims of the Nazi persecutions. The Chief of unit, interpreter Leon Dostert, had applicants tested, selected and trained before they went into the booths, where they were placed so that they could hear and see the speakers. As Gaiba (1998) also mentions, the Tribunal showed a high level of consideration for the work, providing interchanging teams of turn-taking interpreters, a system of signal lights to slow down fast speakers, and assisting the interpreters with terminology. Unsurprisingly, the UN and other organisations adopted this mode.

Readers interested in interpreting history, international organisations and multilingual communication – interpreters, linguists, historians, social scientists – will find Baigorri-Jalon’s book informative thanks to its historical account of conference interpreting as an emerging profession. Interpreter profiles and anecdotes bring the story of interpreting evolution and practices to life. The reader will reflect upon conference setting, interpreting quality, training, working conditions and professional ethics, and the role of interpretation users.

Thanks to its excellent English translation the book flows well; however it would have benefited from being more argument-driven and laconic. Its academic approach is too descriptive, overburdened with lengthy excerpts from documents to illustrate a point, and contains excessive reiterations of detail and recapitulations that add little to chapters. The chapter on the Nuremberg tribunal is barely innovative following Gaiba’s 1998 work.

Despite this criticism, the book remains relevant for its valuable content that acquaints the reader with the 20th century history of conference interpreting from its origins to its 'coming of age'.

Gaiba, F. (1998). *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial*. University of Ottawa Press.

Pöchhacker, F. (2011). Conference Interpreting. In K. Malmkjaer & K. Windle (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (Ch. 21). Oxford University Press.