



Celebrating 100 years of conference interpreting

PROF. KILIAN G. SEEBER¹

When the Big Four met in Versailles in January 1919, they ushered in the modern era of multilateral diplomacy and – perhaps inadvertently – laid the foundation for a new profession. Indeed, while Wilson and Lloyd George spoke English but not French, Orlando spoke French but not English. Clemenceau alone was fluent in both. Communication between the Big Four was, therefore, only possible thanks to the first conference interpreters. For the following 100 years, they would become a permanent fixture at all international multilateral conferences. As we celebrate one century of conference interpreting it seems fitting to take stock of the most important milestones in the history of this exceptional profession, and to attempt to glimpse its future. These are precisely the aims of the conference co-organized by the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting and the International Labour Organization on 3 and 4 October. Inspired by the ILO's unique tripartite structure, the conference will bring together practitioners, trainers and researchers to talk about the past, the present and the future of conference interpreting – at a time when not only multilingualism, but also the multilateral system as a whole is being challenged.

Practice

The practice of conference interpreting has undergone many profound changes over

the years. Although the mainly bilingual environment of the Paris Peace Conference was relatively easy to negotiate in consecutive mode, allowing interpreters to summarize all statements after each speaker had finished, the time required for this type of triangular communication was significant. The League of Nations, and its first specialized agency, the International Labour Organization, were soon confronted with the impracticality of consecutive interpretation. As far back as the early 1920s, therefore, the idea of harnessing technology to overcome the temporal constraints of consecutive interpreting had already gained traction. This is how the simultaneous mode was born: existing telephone technology was repurposed and successfully implemented – in rapid succession – at the ILO and, only a few weeks later, at the Comintern in 1926. By the time the UN was founded in 1945 to supersede the League of Nations, its conference interpreters facilitated meetings in five official languages. Similarly, when the European Economic Community (EEC) was founded in 1957, business was conducted in four official languages through conference interpreters. Today, UN and the EU have six and 24 official languages respectively. However, the challenges for conference interpreters go beyond the sheer number of languages used in meetings: the rampant use of English by non-native speakers even when interpretation is provided, and



the rise of prepared statements read into the record at ever-increasing speeds, push conference interpreters to their processing limits. Together, we will explore whether recent advances in technology, including more robust speech-to-text transcription, neural machine translation, real-time terminology extraction or remote interpreting solutions should be seen as evolution or revolution.

Training

It is in the nature of things that the pioneers of the conference interpreting profession, including Mantoux, Herbert, Velleman and Kaminker, were never formally trained. Instead, they qualified for the job on account of their multilingual upbringing, their involvement in diplomatic circles, and probably a host of skills they had acquired elsewhere. As the demand for conference interpreters grew, however, it became clear that specialized training would be necessary to meet it. At the end of WWII, the first formal conference interpreter training programs emerged, with the noteworthy exception of the Geneva school, which had already been founded in 1941. Within little over a decade, there were conference interpreting programs in Heidelberg, Germersheim, Munich, Paris, Vienna and Georgetown. When the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) was set up in 1953 to represent conference interpreters' interests, it took an active role in shaping training curricula and started officially recognizing interpreter training programs. All the while, International Organizations such as the ILO continued their own internal training activities, which had begun in the early 1920s first and foremost to prepare interpreters for the challenge of

simultaneous interpreting. One of the most successful institutional training programs was undoubtedly the six-month internship offered by the European Institutions, which operated until the late 1990s and which, at the time, produced a large share of all conference interpreters working in Brussels. The close relationship between the institutions employing conference interpreters, the association representing them, and the Universities training them has endured, but it is not always unproblematic. Together, we will look at a trend that sees many interpreter training programs branching out to prepare students for growth markets, such as public service interpreting, with institutional employers only selecting the most promising graduates to join their ranks, and the potentially related phenomenon of mushrooming self-study groups for conference interpreters.

Research

Although the first handbooks on conference interpreting were written by practitioners in the 1950s, it was psychologists like Gerver and Barik who first took interest in the academic study of the discipline, examining the complex task in a laboratory environment. Only about a decade later did practitioners join them in the quest to understand how conference interpreting worked, starting a long tradition of "pracademic" research that has remained a hallmark of the field of interpreting studies. The bulk of the research into the training, practice, language, modalities, and process of conference interpreting, therefore, has been penned by practitioners with or without formal training in research methods. As the first doctoral programs specifically dedicated to interpreting studies were established in the early 2000s, over the

past 10 years we have seen a qualitative leap in the methodological rigor of research into conference interpreting, including an increase in more complex qualitative and quantitative research designs. While the old dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research is far from overcome, we are particularly interested in discussing the added value research findings can provide for the training of conference interpreters and the practice of conference interpreting.

We trust that these two days will be filled to the brim with constructive yet provocative debates worthy of the anniversary around which they are organized, and we are counting on practitioners, trainers and researchers alike to make this a memorable event. ■

For more information: www.unige.ch/fti/conf1nt100

1 Prof. Killian G. Seeber is Vice dean of the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, and Director of the Interpreting Department

**Your governmental rates 2019
within Accor Geneva
until 31st March 2020**

**15 hotels and 1 aparthotel
from economic to upscale**

Scan the QR Code or contact:
pauline.mancheron@accor.com

MGALLERY \ NOVOTEL \ ADAGIO \ IBIS \ IBIS STYLES \ IBIS BUDGET