
At first glance, this might not appear to be a volume which students of diplomatic history would rush to pick from the shelves. Yet they would be missing a great deal if they did not. It is a fascinating book, translated from Spanish, in which the author sets out to examine the development of interpreting and translating at international conferences in the first half of the twentieth century. It is the product of research in the League of Nations archives in Geneva and of the extensive use of memoirs and diaries and its theme is how conference interpreting moved from a rather makeshift set of arrangements at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to the eventual development and operation of simultaneous interpretation at the Nuremberg War Trials between 1945–46.

The work is in five chapters beginning with the Paris Conference then covering the experience of the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization in two chapters. There is also a separate chapter on the role of interpreters in translating for the dictators of the inter-war period where they became part of the entourage of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin and were closely associated with the respective regimes. The book concludes with the post-war Nuremberg Trials where four languages, English, French, German, and Russian were used and where large scale simultaneous interpreting came to the fore and set a standard in international forums and diplomacy.

Prior to the Paris Conference, French was the universal language of diplomacy and thus translating and interpreting were not formally necessary. This changed in 1919 with the rise of English as a rival language to French. A number of circumstances were responsible as Baigorri-Jalón shows. Not all the wartime leaders who assembled at Versailles were schooled in French: neither Lloyd George nor Woodrow Wilson spoke the language whereas Clemenceau did speak English—he was married to an American. In addition any peace agreement would need to be presented to the US Senate and would have to be in English. While French was the diplomatic language of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the role of the English speaking peoples in the Great War was a major factor in the acceptance of English
as a co-official language at Paris and as a diplomatic language for international diplomacy more generally. This then led to a need for interpreters and translators of English and French and also of those other languages which delegations to Paris might use before official documents and records were translated into the accepted dual languages. Baigorri-Jalón shows that, not surprisingly, there was no profession of interpreting at the time and the procedures at Versailles were somewhat ad hoc. Many of the interpreters who emerged to handle the work had been employed as linguists in War Ministries or Army Staffs during the First World War; but their numbers were not great and the author is able to provide a short biography of the individuals who played a key role in interpreting at Versailles some of whom, such as Gustave Camerlynck and Paul Mantoux, had served as French liaison officers with the British during the War. The procedures of interpreting and translating were not codified at Paris and this allowed for a range of functions to emerge. Besides interpreting, those called on also acted as translators, reporters, and even revisers. Their skill as interpreters was viewed in awe by some of the political leaders who had little competence in languages. They mingled with government ministers, national diplomats, and advisers acting as participants in the full glare of the proceedings of which they were unquestionably a key part.

The Versailles Conference gave rise to the League of Nations where once more English and French were solidified as the official languages and where, following the example of Paris, consecutive interpreting was the norm. This required the interpreter to wait while the speaker delivered the speech and to then provide the translation. Given the passage of time, this required not only excellent linguistic skills but also a keen memory and led to the interpreter delivering the overall meaning of a speech. In this sense interpreting, with an understanding of accents, inflections, and the context of speeches was far more than the mere conversion of words from one language to another but did at times run the risk of the interpreter straying from the literal meaning of a speech while seeking to remain true to what the interpreter thought the speaker meant. The experience of the interpreters at Paris in performing these functions and the regard in which they were held, led them to see their expertise as an innate talent and one which could not be taught. But there was a rival approach, endorsed by those who saw interpreting as a learned skill and who championed the literal word for word approach as the key to interpreting.

This rival school of simultaneous interpreting had more success in another product of the Paris Conference; the International Labour Organization. The trialling and eventual success of this later form was down to the actions of an American businessman, Edward Filene, and a British engineer, A. Gordon-Finlay, who devised the system which would allow the interpreter to listen in one language and speak in another at the same time.
Baigorri-Jalón shows that the training given for this mode of work demonstrated that it was something which could be learnt—it was not an art but a skill—and for this reason and for the fact that it undermined the form of consecutive interpreting where the interpreter was given a more prominent role, it was resisted by the staff interpreters at the League of Nations in the inter-war period. But with technical advances, simultaneous interpreting was eventually to displace the consecutive approach with the results being seen in Nuremberg between 1945 and 1946. Another effect of the rise of the simultaneous mode was that it broke the hold of English and French in international conference diplomacy, allowing numerous languages to be used and the wider participation of those who would otherwise have been excluded because of language barriers: this was the experience in the ILO where trades union members and business representatives were able to attend and speak in what appeared to be more democratic forums.

At Nuremberg after the end of the Second World War, simultaneous interpreting came into its own, but the profession was still divided between the consecutive interpreters who had been at Paris and worked in the League of Nations and who saw interpreting as a talent and those who had seen the possibilities of simultaneous translation in the ILO but who were castigated by the former as mere conduits—‘parrots’ and ‘telephone operators.’ It was a battle that was to continue into the forums of the United Nations, something which Baigorri-Jalón notes is the subject of another study: students of diplomatic history should look forward to it.

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