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Conference Interpreting:
Evolution and Revolution.
Notes on the Feminisation
of the Profession

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Abstract

This paper deals with certain aspects of the history of conference interpreting. Based on previous research, reference is made to several features which have characterised the evolution of the profession since its inception less than a century ago. In this historically brief period, conference interpreting has gone through changes of revolutionary scope. Among these, stress will be placed particularly on the fact that the profession has become more structured and also preponderantly feminine.

Keywords:
conference interpreting; consecutive interpreting; simultaneous interpreting; history; feminisation.
The precedents

Conference interpreting as we know it is a young profession, born after the First World War. In its brief history it has experienced – and is indeed experiencing - changes in its technical and sociological aspects, among others. A summary version of this evolution can be found in Baigorri (1999), where I proposed these conclusions:

2. SI [simultaneous interpreting] experiments started, and had a measure of success, in the second half of the 1920s.
3. SI came of age in the Nuremberg Trials and soon triumphed over consecutive, through a less than smooth process, at the United Nations Headquarters.
4. The second revolution in conference interpreting in the 20th century, namely the introduction of new technologies that will allow remote interpretation, is still going on. (BAIGORRI, 1999b: 38)

In this paper, I wish to focus on a phenomenon which has taken place during the last few decades, affecting in a remarkable manner the profile of our profession. It is what I will call the feminisation of the profession. I will start by defining both terms, feminisation and profession. The term feminise is defined in the 3rd entry of Webster's Dictionary as 'to cause (as a population) to be made up more of females than of males: render preponderantly feminine in composition (low salaries have feminized the teaching profession)'. The definition of profession in the same dictionary is as follows (entry 4 a): 'a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods, as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organization or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service'. (Even the example given deserves comment and we will come to it later.)

We could go back in History and find female interpreters whose names have been recorded. Everybody has heard about Doña Marina –better known as Malinche-, who served as interpreter for Cortés in Mexico in the sixteenth century. The 'conquest'
of that continent took a very long time, and other female interpreters were involved in
the endeavour, such as Sacajawea, who interpreted for Lewis and Clark in their expedi-
tion to the Pacific at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These two examples
serve as an illustration of the fact that in very complex and dangerous situations, wo-
men interpreters have been in the frontline of historic events. When it comes to the
beginning of conference interpreting, however, this was not the case.

A combination of reasons could explain this. The first ‘conference interpreters’ –
those who worked in the context of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference – had practised –
limited though their practise was – in the Interallied Committees during the First World
War, which – as regards fronts and battles – was a ‘males only’ affair. On the ‘home front’
things were different, and many women were employed in language-related posts at the
Ministries of Defence – or War, as they were called at the time. Propaganda, censorship
and military intelligence were activities performed by women, as we know from the files
of some of those who not much later would become translators at the League of Nations
(LoN) or the International Labour Office (ILO) (BAIGORRI JALÓN, 1998b: 134-139). It
has been said that the First World War was women’s 1789 (LAGRAVE, 2000: 508) and
there are certain phenomena which confirm that idea: women obtained the right to vote
in several countries around that date, and more women – especially from well off fami-
lies – were entering further education, particularly in areas of the so-called ‘liberal’
studies (LAGRAVE: 516). These could be considered as indicators of revolutionary changes.
However, it is no less true that in many areas there was still a very long way to go.

The feminisation process

Conference interpreting at the LoN was essentially diplomatic interpreting. Diplo-
macy was almost monopolised by men. Interpreters, in those days, intermingled with
their ‘principals’ and spoke from the same rostrum. It is not surprising that interpreters
were only men. In the 1920s there are, however, two interesting pieces which contribute
to complete the puzzle of feminisation. The first one is the case of Olivia Rossetti
Agresti, who belonged to the Anglo-Italian Rossetti family, famous above all because of
Dante Gabriele Rossetti, the poet and artist associated with the preraphaelite movement
(MADARIAGA, 1974: 107). She was recommended by an important Italian politician,

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2 Refer to Karttunen (1994), Delisle & Woodsworth (1995) and Roland (1999) for more
information about interpreters in History, including women.
after she had a long record of good interpreting and translation in international gatherings. She was systematically hired for the League’s annual assemblies from 1922 till 1930, and according to the Noblemaire principle she was treated exactly the same as her male counterparts as regards salary and workload (BAIGORRI, 2000: 150-151).

The second case is related to another international organisation born after the Treaty of Versailles, the ILO. Its conferences gathered representatives from governments (one third), employers’ associations (one third) and workers’ unions (the other third). It can be assumed that the government officials and employers’ representatives sent to these international fora might be fluent in one of the two official languages of the LoN system, that is French or English. It is more difficult to assume the same multilingual abilities for the workers’ sector, for obvious reasons. It is not surprising, thus, that the first attempts at simultaneous interpreting (SI) were more welcomed at the ILO than at the LoN. The first large-scale experiment in SI, a revolutionary event indeed, took place at the ILO Conference in 1928, where seven languages were used at the same time. It was preceded by a ‘course’ in which nine ‘interpreters’ qualified: five were men and four were women. ‘Although there was still a long way to go before the current feminisation of the profession, this was a sign of things to come’ (BAIGORRI, 1999a: 6). All of them were staff members of the ILO, who worked in the Diplomatic Division. Was the presence of ‘mechanical devices’, such as microphones and headphones, seen as ‘degrading’ by the top-bat interpreters of the League? Was it fear of the unknown? One thing is clear: none of them volunteered to participate in the SI tests at the ILO, although all had been invited. Be that as it may, the fact that workers could speak and listen in their own languages was a huge step towards the democratisation of international gatherings, which were previously attended only by upper-class polyglots.

After the Second World War, the (main) Nuremberg Trial symbolises, among many other things, the coming of age of SI. GAIBA (1998) has compiled the names of some 48 interpreters who worked at the Trial. Women represented around 35% of that figure, which means a very big change compared with the previous two decades, in which virtually no women interpreters were to be found. No gender distinction was made at the Trial as regards assignments or interpretation quality, which was judged to be very good.

The battle between simultaneous and consecutive interpreting at the United Nations (UN) took place in 1946/47 and it ended up with a resounding victory for simultaneous, despised as it was by the consecutive interpreters, who spoke of their simultaneous colleagues as ‘téléphonistes’ – was there in this pejorative description a gender biased connotation? – or as performers of a parrot – or ape-like ability, far less professional than the consecutive modality. Some of the first SI interpreters at the UN were women, but the first generations of UN interpreters continued to be mainly male. The gender
imbalance began to be offset at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Two phenomena help explain this change. First, the erosion and exhaustion through ageing of the first generations. Second, the arrival of the younger generations who this time came from a totally different background: the specialised interpretation schools.

Interpreting was unknown as a profession in the 1920s. At that time, the creation of schools of a profession which did not exist as such would have been totally unthinkable. It is true that there were interpretation courses in the Foreign ministries of certain countries (ROLAND: 139-155). But it was not until 1941 when Antoine Velleman had the idea of creating an interpretation school in Geneva (BAIGORRI, 1998a), which continues to be one of the most prestigious in the field. Others were founded after the Second World War, such as Vienna, Mainz-Germersheim, Saarland, Georgetown, Heidelberg (DELISLE & WOODSWORTH, 1995: 252) and others followed, like those in Munich, Paris (ESIT), Trieste, etc.

Giving an academic status to a profession makes a significant contribution towards defining it. Before interpretation schools existed, interpreters arrived at the trade by chance and through self-training (of the hands-on type) or no training at all, thus leaving unfulfilled some of the elements of the definition I gave earlier. A school, if run by the right people, can create the appropriate learning and training conditions for interested candidates. Once the school is functioning and once their students find a place in the market and not before, people with the necessary background are in a position to consider the possibility of training to become interpreters, that is, to follow ‘a calling’.

The beginning of the 1950s was the time when a number of interpretation schools were created, as we have seen. At the same time we can record the publication of the Manuel by Jean Herbert and the Prise de notes by Rozan, which contributed to giving the profession its academic dimension. The creation of the Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence (AIIC) in 1953 was the last necessary ingredient to give the profession its social profile. With AIIC, run in its first days by founders of or teachers from the interpretation schools (KEISER, 1999), interpreters acquired a distinct social profile, with admission requirements which took into account previous training and background, and with professional rules which gave consideration to aspects such as working conditions, quality, fees and, of course, a code of ethics.

The decades of the 1960s to the 1980s saw a boom in the participation of women in many social fields from which they had been absent up until then (ERGAS, 2000). That is how they arrived at virtually all areas of education and research. And that is also how they began to participate in the labour market in proportions unknown so far. Languages were considered in those years as a very appropriate field of study for women, as happened with the nursing or the elementary school-teaching professions.
These and other reasons may explain why nowadays the interpreting profession has been feminised. Figures in the UN show that staff interpreters have evolved from around 20% of women in 1950 to around 30% in 1970 and to around 50% in 2000.\(^3\) Seventy-five per cent of the AIIC members are women. Interpreting schools have an overwhelming proportion of women.

**Conclusions**

We can arrive at certain provisional conclusions which may be of some interest to our profession. We must assume that linguistic abilities are evenly distributed by sexes. PINKER (1994: 429) signals the similarities between both sexes as regards language. KIMURA (1992) finds no differences between the sexes on tests of vocabulary, although women show greater verbal fluency and use the brain hemispheres more equally than men. AITCHISON (1992: 116) remarks that the impression that women talk more than men in incorrect, according to research: “men talk more than women”. In the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Women, status of) we read the following:

No statement can with any certainty be made about the origins of feminine or masculine personality traits beyond saying that psychosexual orientation appears to be the outcome of complex interactions among genetic, hormonal, and environmental factors whose relative importance in the whole process of character formation is impossible to ascertain. This view is now almost universally accepted, by biologically oriented scholars no less than by psychologists and sociologists. (BRITANNICA, 19: 907)

The fact that women were absent from the ranks of interpreters at the beginning of the profession was primarily due to social reasons. The prevailing stereotype was that women belong to the realm of their home. The changes brought by the IWW meant that women acceded to many posts which had been reserved for men up until then. As

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\(^3\) If only interpreters belonging to the English, French and Spanish booths, whose members have been there since the beginning of the UN (unlike those in the Arabic booth) and are recruited freely in the market (unlike those in the Chinese and Russian booths for an important part of the UN history) were taken into account, the feminisation process would be much clearer. In 1980 the proportion of women would be 53% and in 2000 69% (Baigorri, 1998b: 644-645).
regards interpreting, women were not supposed to be in highly visible posts among mainly male diplomats and representatives and there were very few in the 1920s and 1930s. The feminisation of the profession in more recent times has not meant the degradation of the profession, as some of the forefathers of the (consecutive) profession may have thought. On the contrary, the process of the social definition of the interpreting profession has been parallel with the process of feminisation. That is, the current social relevance of the profession is associated with a sociological profile in which the fact of being a woman is the rule rather than the exception. This is true to such an extent that for certain language combinations in some TV programmes where they want male voices associated with male participants, male interpreters are difficult to find. The high competence the profession requires in the linguistic, technical and extralinguistic areas, has been maintained in parallel with the feminisation of the profession. This confirms similar processes in other fields, as demonstrated by GUERRERO SERÓN (1996: 196) who speaks about the primary school teaching profession, thus proving the inadequacy of the example given in the Webster’s definition of feminize. Women have had a lot of opportunities to enter not only the institutional market (as staff interpreters) but also the free-lance market, where they have been able to make child-bearing and – rearing obligations compatible with the professional exercise of a well paid job, with assignments which can be accepted for a limited number of days.

The feminisation of the profession is here to stay. ‘...[U]n oficio feminizado ya no se masculiniza’ (SOHN, 2000: 130). And, as LAGRAVE also says: ‘Las jóvenes generaciones lo mismo que las anteriores, se orientan hacia las ramas ya feminizadas. En las universidades de todos los países, las ramas preferidas siguen siendo las letras, las lenguas, la farmacia y, en menor medida, la medicina’ (2000: 538). Although opportunities are equal for male and female candidates, our interpretation schools have in general a disproportionate number of women. So, the future interpreter generation will continue to be feminine.

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