



A profession with a view

A short review of *Conference Interpreting: Principles and Practice* by Valerie Taylor-Bouladon , with an excerpt from the book.

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Conference Interpreting: Principles and Practice

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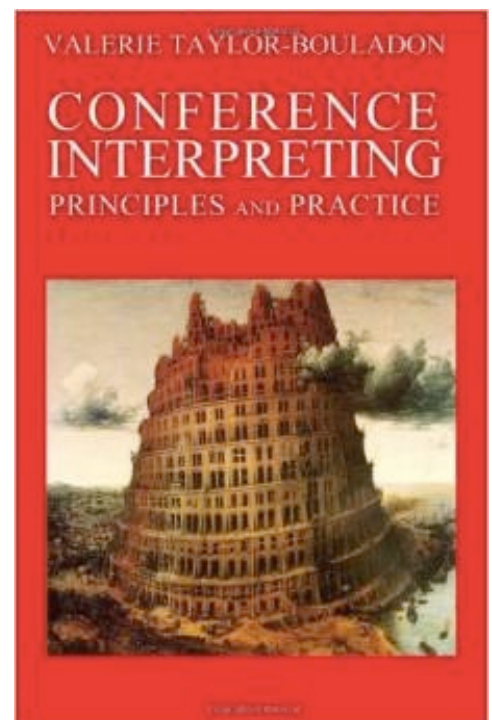
These days we all recognise that interpreting is an age-old profession in essence and a very modern one in its current manifestations. The advent of simultaneous interpretation last

century changed the practice of the profession and in a sense initiated a move away from the interpreter as artist to the interpreter as technician. The growth of information

technology promises more change, perhaps in the way we practice interpretation, certainly in the way we communicate with each other and organise our profession.

Valerie Taylor-Bouladon has seen these changes and more in her three decades as a conference interpreter. In *Conference Interpreting: Principles and Practice*, she brings together the lessons of her own experience with knowledge accumulated in the community of professional interpreters. The result is a very readable summary, spiced up with anecdotes and quotes, of what it means to be a conference interpreter and how our profession has evolved over time and place.

Moreover, it is a very useful book, although (as the author herself readily points out) it is not a textbook. For more experienced interpreters it may awaken fond memories, and it certainly offers some useful reminders that we would all be advised to take into daily consideration. (So, you were pouring water right in front of the microphone again and didn't have a hand free to hit



the cough button?) For newcomers, there is sound advice on conference preparation, working arrangements and ethical questions. And its balanced treatment of training, choice of languages and health concerns will be useful in helping the would-be interpreter decide if conference interpreting is really for her.

In regard to health questions, Valerie Taylor-Bouladon includes a brief section on stress in which she mentions the value of disciplines such as the Alexander technique. This is dear to my heart as I have practiced this technique for years and found it fundamental in relieving the nagging physical manifestations of stress (tense shoulders, sore back) that often go with a sedentary job requiring total concentration. It taught me that concentration does not demand muscular tension, or in other words, that leaning forward hunched over the microphone was actually extraneous to good concentration and much harder to maintain for hours than simple good posture.

It should be mentioned that much of the book was written with Australia in mind. The author moved there from Geneva in 1981 and became active in establishing what was then a little-known profession down under. It may be that her efforts to inform potential clients and others about our profession, to explain what we do to the uninitiated, planted the seed that grew into this book.

We at *Communicate!* are pleased to be able to reproduce the book's introduction below. This is the best description of what the book sets out to do and we thank the author for giving us permission to include it here.

Conference Interpreting: Principles and Practice

Chapter 1

Introduction

This book, apart from Chapter 11, is intended for Australian interpreters, would-be interpreters wondering whether to embark on interpreter training and formally trained beginners. It cannot of course take the place of a training course; however I hope it will be a useful adjunct to training courses and provide some of the information that students find it difficult to obtain in this country.

I also hope that it will succeed in dispelling some of the myths about interpreting: that we don't understand what we are saying, that the act of listening while speaking is the essence of simultaneous interpretation (whereas in fact the essence is *understanding*), that we all know ten or even seventeen languages (does a good musician play ten instruments?), that spoken language is more difficult for us than texts that are read out (the contrary is true).

Conference interpreting is at least as old as the Book of Genesis in which Joseph outwitted his brothers by, as the book says, speaking "unto them by an interpreter." But it is a new profession in this country. This book is intended as a guide for those interested in this new profession, to give you some idea of how it is practised in the rest of the world. Colleagues will often feel that some of it is obvious whilst newcomers may not fully understand the reasons behind some of the statements. However, it is based on contributions from many professional interpreters and some delegates, as well as thirty years' experience working at international conferences all over the world both for United Nations and the private business market.

There is an urgent need in this country to maintain quality and standards. Our reputation for quality is only the sum of our individual efforts to create it.

Breaches of simple rules of behaviour affect the delegates' image of the professional interpreter and if we want to be treated like professionals and paid as professionals, we must behave and work like professionals.

Conference interpreting is a highly qualified and demanding profession. In some ways it is like tightrope walking without a safety net. It requires not only an exacting knowledge of languages but also thorough training in interpreting skills and the ability to understand people with all sorts of different accents, of different cultural backgrounds, and in a wide variety of subjects - even the most technical.

There are between five and six thousand languages in the world today to choose from. There is no doubt that learning a foreign language is hard work. Only dieting seems to take up so much human endeavour with so few results and the prosperity of the language industry, like that of the diet business, is founded on failure. Banish the fantasy that one day, by concentrating on language tapes, you will converse fluently and wittily with foreigners and perhaps even eventually become a conference interpreter. Do not tackle Finnish unless you are confident about coping with the sixteen cases including the triple dative. Banish too the thought that a good community interpreter who works hard will one day work his way up through the NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) levels to become a Level 5 conference interpreter. Conference interpreting is a different kettle of fish. Until your other languages are almost equivalent to a mother tongue, there is no point in studying conference interpretation skills.

To start with, if you must learn a language, choose your own neglected mother-tongue. Dazzle your friends with your clarity of expression, your perfect diction. Your mother tongue is one of your most precious possessions, whichever type of interpreting you eventually take up. It is certainly the most important language for a conference interpreter. Take good care of it, polish it, cosset it and protect it from contamination from other languages and accents (and Australian vowels). Keep it up-to-date by reading newspapers and modern literature, as well as the classics. Keep it clear and authentic and easy to understand. For example, the English booth has to be understood by Indians, Norwegians, Nigerians, Philipinos, Finns ... You cannot expect them to understand a Welsh accent or gallicisms. So, keep your language pure and above all, clear.

There is no point in giving an excellent interpretation if your audience cannot understand what you are saying.

Conference interpreting is a profession which, to the uninitiated, seems either strange and exotic or totally faceless, according to your perception. This book is an attempt to draw back the veil of mystery and explain the profession to which we devote ourselves.

Conference interpreters are to be heard working at large and small international conferences or meetings, where the delegates or participants are using two or more different languages. They are therefore language and communication experts who transmit a message spoken in one language in a different language and hence make trans-lingual communication possible. They do this either "simultaneously" or "consecutively". With simultaneous interpretation, they sit in a booth in the meeting room and, listening through earphones to delegates' speech in one language, transmit the verbal message via the microphone into another language for delegates wishing to listen to that second language. With consecutive interpretation, they sit in the meeting room, listen to and take notes on a speech or intervention and, when it is completed, re-create that speech or intervention in the second language. Consecutive interpretation is more time-consuming, and is more suitable for small meetings, using two or at most three languages, whereas simultaneous interpretation can be used for an almost unlimited number of languages and participants - all you need is one booth per language, a sufficient number of interpreters to understand all the languages being used and a sufficient number of receivers for the delegates. Some interpreters may prefer one method over another but a professional conference/court interpreter is expected to work in either mode.

Conference interpreting today - as opposed to interpreting as it has existed from time immemorial and which has often been called the second oldest profession, started with the foundation of the League of Nations, where everything was interpreted consecutively. Simultaneous interpretation was introduced for the Nuremberg trials after the Second World

War, by which time the necessary technology was available. The old hands of the League of Nations said disparagingly at the time that it was a crazy idea, would probably not work and would certainly be impossible to keep up. Today, however, the overwhelming majority of our work is done simultaneously.

Who are the people who spend their lives engaged in these high-speed mental gymnastics? In the "old days" they tended to be people who could speak several languages naturally because they had "naturally" grown up in a multi-lingual family environment or because, for various reasons, they had moved around from country to country. Today's young interpreters tend to have acquired their languages "artificially" via school, university and interpreters' school - with, of course, visits to the countries where their languages are spoken.

In either case, the basic *sine qua non* is a deep and thorough knowledge of one's own and one or more foreign languages and, obviously, some are more useful than others - English, French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese and Chinese, for instance, are heard more frequently at international meetings than, say, Korean, Turkish or Finnish. Then, the interpreter needs training and experience in conference interpreting techniques - how to create English that sounds like English out of a message say, in Russian or German where the verb often comes late in the sentence. How to cope with differences of cultural background between, say, Arabic and English, how to use a microphone without coughing and rustling into it, how to pitch the voice so that it is pleasant to listen to.

But over and above linguistic skills, a conference interpreter needs a wide general knowledge, an adequate understanding of an enormous range of subjects; obviously we have to know about the structure and activities of the international organisations where we work; we have to have a deep understanding of all aspects of current affairs; we have to understand the political, legal and financial systems not only in our own countries but in many others as well. In addition, to cope with the many varied working environments in which we find ourselves, we have to be able to speak the language of heads of state, of nurses, surgeons, fishermen, lawyers, nuclear physicists, of computer experts, aircraft designers, foresters, animal protectionists... the list is literally endless, but these are all worlds with which we have to familiarize ourselves, whose subject matter we have to understand before we can interpret at their international meetings. So, in view of the increasing complexity and technical sophistication of today's world, in addition to languages a university level of education or its equivalent is becoming increasingly important, and a law, engineering, medical or economic degree is preferable to a degree in languages.

Having acquired our skills, we like any other profession try to practise them to the best of our ability and according to a strict code of ethics which lays down absolute confidentiality and professional standards.

So all the prerequisites are there but, like so many other people today, we are also heavily dependent on technology - in our case, the sound system through which the message enters our earphones. These days it can be a wire, radio or infra-red based system, but only if we receive the message not too loudly or quietly and very clearly can we process it and communicate it to our listeners. They in turn need to hear us clearly. So the sound system with which we work is one of our key concerns.

The demands are great, but so are the rewards for, coming as we do from an enormous variety of cultural backgrounds, we conference interpreters have one very important thing in common - an enormous enthusiasm for our job. We are all fascinated by language, how it works, how it can be used to promote understanding. We want to use all our linguistic and general knowledge to enable our listeners to overcome the barriers of language and to communicate fully and without restriction, and this our profession gives us the opportunity to do. It also gives us the satisfaction of having contributed to the advancement of science, the conquest of disease and efforts to achieve world peace. Interpretation is a fascinating subject that has close links with politics, diplomacy, science, human rights, declarations of war and peace and the development and dissemination of knowledge throughout the ages.

Now, if you still want to be a conference interpreter, read on.

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