



Book review: Interpreters at the United Nations: A History

Jesús Baigorri's book is a timely reminder of the role played by interpreters in the history of The United Nations, and the impulse these pioneers gave to making conference interpreting into a veritable profession

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Translated by Anne Barr
Ediciones de la Universidad de Salamanca
Salamanca, 2004

The book is dedicated to all professional interpreters.

Jesús Baigorri has published a timely reminder of the role played by interpreters in the history of The United Nations, that most international of all international organisations. “Interpreters at the United Nations” completes the narrative the author embarked on in his earlier “La interpretación de conferencias: el nacimiento de una profesión. De París a Nuremberg.”

The author has used primary sources for the book, and sets out events in chronological order from 1945 to the present. The UN and professional interpreting developed in parallel over that period.

It is common knowledge that simultaneous interpretation was first used extensively at the Nuremberg Trials. In those days the nascent profession was split between those who favoured consecutive and those who supported simultaneous. This dispute was played out at the UN and it ended with interpreters as a body rallying behind simultaneous interpreting. But the early days were still marked by memories of the veteran League of Nations interpreters, people of prestigious memory and commanding presence – an image that also attached itself to early UN interpreters. The pioneers were not anonymous in the way interpreters are today. They performed consecutive interpretation in the conference room, relying on their language knowledge, memory and force of personality to hold the room. What is more, many entered the profession because they had learned their languages through the upheavals and dislocations of war and revolution.

The pioneers were followed by the “transition” generation, people who had made a career choice to become interpreters and learned their languages at school and university, but who had received no formal training in conference interpretation.

Subsequently the interpreters who entered the UN had not only learned their languages at school and university, but had attended interpreting school. Most UN interpreters today fall into this category. By the time this generation of interpreters arrived the interpreting service was established, but it was they who fought for formal codification of rights and terms of employment. Industrial action – those involved were loath to call it a “strike” – was organised to push the interpreters’ case.

The dispute clarified the role of the interpreter, led to the creation of effective interpreter representation and reinforced the role of interpreting schools. AIIC lent its support to the recently clarified working conditions. Academics began to take an interest in interpreting, and started to contribute to a growing corpus of interpreting literature. The use of interpreting spread outside the international organisations to the private market, and there was a marked increase in women entering the profession.

Related works

Jesús Baigorri-Jalón

La interpretación de conferencias: el nacimiento de una profesión. De París a Nuremberg

Editorial Comares

Granada, 2000

In French

De Paris à Nuremberg: Naissance de l'interprétation de conférence

(Traduit de l'espagnol sous la direction de Clara Foz)

Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa

Ottawa, 2004.

(Orders: www.uopress.uottawa.ca)

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