

Interpreting in International Organizations. Research, Training and Practice

FOREWORD

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Professional interpreters are faced with the option of working as freelancers in the private market, or as staff interpreters in national or international institutions, or a combination of the two. This is precisely the case of freelancers in international organizations.

Each option reflects personal aspirations and needs as well as individual lifestyle choices nurtured by a professional role that arouses admiration for the highly qualified skills required and for the way they ensure communication between human beings. Each option also raises concerns for the working conditions in which interpreters are nowadays expected to perform, which can range from challenging in-process and peri-process (Kalina 2005: 778) working situations such as interpreting in multilingual settings where a lingua franca is used (or rather, misused) to interpreting in conflict zones where life-threatening risks besiege them from all sides.

The aim of this special issue is to provide insight into interpreting practice in international organizations from the perspective of those who work or have worked as professional interpreters. These insights are informed by the experience of the many

interpreters who have responded to two recent surveys and by the findings of a number of prominent researchers in the field.

This volume covers a wide array of topics that prospective interpreters and interpreter trainers in this kind of interpreter-mediated communicative settings will find valuable. Contributions range from descriptions of training courses in interpreting for international organizations to the challenges of selective entrance examinations. As a whole, they provide a picture of the variety of high prestige multilingual institutions employing professional interpreters, mostly the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU). A second special issue on the same subject, dedicated entirely to the EU, will be published by CLINA in the coming months.

The first contribution, by Leire Carbonell-Agüero and entitled *Training Interpretation Students at Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (MIIS) to Work for International Organizations*, can be considered a paradigmatic example of what a reputed T&I training institution can do to equip interpreters for IO environments. The author describes the structure and peculiarities of her institution, while pointing out the basic features that this qualified master's degree shares with other interpreter training programs. In particular, she focuses on their student-centered learning approach, the undisputed value of having practicing professional interpreters as trainers to bring students closer to market quality standards and topics, and the best practice of offering a supervised practicum in interpretation in real interpreting events as part of the regular study plan. Practicum in real world professional situations, which are also present in several other higher interpreter education institutions worldwide, are undoubtedly the best possible catalyst to turn what students have learnt in the classroom into relevant interpreting skills to face the many challenges awaiting them in the professional world. In so doing, students taste the pleasure of playing the professional interpreter's role, which spurs them on towards becoming a top quality language mediators. In stressing the need for interpreter schools to give students the skills they need to pass the entrance examinations of international organizations and work as freelancers or staff members, Carbonell-Agüero highlights the main challenges candidates need to face. As far as the UN is concerned, interestingly, she quotes in her article Marie Diur, who wonders «why is the success rate medium or low in the Language Competitive Examination in the United Nations?», thus establishing a «virtual dialogue» with the authors of the following contribution in this volume.

Lucía Ruiz Rosendo and Marie Diur's highly informative contribution on the UN structure, entitled *Admission exams in international organisations: The United Nations' Language Competitive Examination (LCE)*, examines the characteristics and preparation necessary for success, and they offer valuable guidance for all those interpreters wishing to work for the UN. The authors maintain that these exams reflect the three main challenges that UN interpreters face daily: speed, UN topics, and accents. These

challenges emerged from a survey they circulated among the staff interpreters from all six official language sections. As to speed, the authors provide an insightful piece of information, namely that the average delivery rate at the UN is 161 wpm, with 160 wpm for English source speeches. Simultaneous interpreters in the European Parliament work under similar time pressures, since 130-160 wpm, with 157 wpm for English source speeches, is the medium delivery rate calculated during the plenaries (Sandrelli et al. 2010, Iglesias Fernández 2010). Like the previous author, Rosendo and Diur stress the need for interpreter schools to train students in the skills required to pass the test and aim at helping candidates anticipate the difficulties.

The next three contributions focus precisely on these difficulties highlighted by professional interpreters in several multilingual international organizations: Jesús Baigorri-Jalón and Crispulo Travieso-Rodríguez at the UN in New York, Geneva and Vienna; Kilian Seeber at the European Union; and Clare Donovan at the OECD in Paris.

Jesús Baigorri-Jalón and Crispulo Travieso-Rodríguez, in their *Interpreting at the United Nations: the impact of external variables. The Interpreters' View*, present the results of their survey of UN staff interpreters who were asked to give their opinion on how changes in their working conditions during the last two decades had affected their professional performance. Their contribution vividly highlights how the workload has changed over the years under the impact of technologies, and the extensive use of relay, English as lingua franca, strong non-native accents, read-out speeches and, above all, high delivery rates.

These last three factors, i.e. high speed, the written nature of read discourse and marked accents, are at the top of the list of challenges also encountered by interpreters at the European Parliament. These are carefully analysed by Kilian Seeber in *Interpreting at the European Institutions: Faster, higher, stronger* from the perspective of language processing in general, and simultaneous conference interpreting in particular. Upon providing a detailed description of the working conditions and of the characteristics of EU interpreter-mediated assignments and meetings with special reference to the three above-mentioned phenomena, the author tackles each of them by examining in depth the cognitive and linguistic implications of comprehension and production, before discussing their effects during simultaneous interpretation. His literature- and evidence-based arguments stress the difficulties simultaneous interpreters are faced with, and all the more so when the three challenges are combined as is increasingly the case in today's international organizations. Seeber calls for strategic and technological solutions to support the interpreters' daunting task. His call for such aids is all the more justified in the light of recent ICT developments enabling computer-assisted interpreting (CAI) with such time- and resource-saving applications as Automatic Speech Recognition-CAI integration to automatically querying specialized vocabulary and having target translations appear on the screen along with other potential problem-triggers like proper nouns, acronyms or figures (Fantinuoli 2017).

The need for conference interpreters to rely on new communication resources and information technology to keep up with the changes in speech delivery patterns and meeting formats is also voiced by the next author, Clare Donovan, in *The Place of the Interpreter and interpreting in an Institutional Setting*, who takes us into a different multilateral working environment, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) based in Paris. A detailed description of the institutional setup and of interpreters' tasks and pre-requisites is provided. Considering the OECD lifespan, the author highlights the changes that have occurred in recent interpreting practice: the increased use of simultaneous interpreting and of English as lingua franca, remote participation in meetings and remote interpreting, with their inevitable impact on interpreters' work and perceptions. Once again, the issue of fast source speech rates emerges as one of the most challenging features affecting interpreter performance and, generally, communication.

The last contribution, *Interpreting at the Border: «Shuttle interpreting» for the UNHCR*, by Marija Todorova, takes us away from comfortable booth-equipped meeting rooms into the field, where challenges are plenty and, sometimes, of a different nature. Here, the interpreter acquires visibility and exerts his/her mediating role to the full. Two case-studies in the form of narratives are presented: one concerns the author's experience in Macedonia and Kosovo and the other one the experience of one of her colleagues in Macedonia. As pointed out by the author herself, interpreting in conflict zones places traditional ethical and deontological tenets of the profession into a different light and brings to the fore the interpreter's role of advocacy for the vulnerable.

To conclude, the contributions included in this special issue aim at presenting the work of professional interpreters in multilingual international organizations from various perspectives, namely training, selection and professional practice in a variety of settings, and inherent challenges.

We hope that students, scholars and interpreters alike will find this issue's contents inspiring for the profession and for future research.

The Editors

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