

The Interpreters' Newsletter

Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche, del Linguaggio, dell'Interpretazione
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Sezione di Studi in Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori (SSLMIT)
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Interpreting
and interpreters
throughout history

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Book reviews

TAYOKO TAKEDA / JESÚS BAIGORRI-JALON (EDS) (2016) *NEW INSIGHTS IN THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETING*, AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA, JOHN BENJAMINS, 278 PP. ISBN 9789027258670.

REVIEWED BY CATERINA FALBO AND ALESSANDRA RICCARDI

This volume on new research on the history of interpreting is a selection of papers from the *First International Symposium on the History of Interpreting* held in Tokyo in May 2014 and integrated by two complementary contributions. The aim of the volume, as stated by the editors, Tayoko Takeda and Jesús Baigorri-Jalon, is to contribute to the development of historical knowledge and research in Interpreting Studies and beyond. In our opinion, the aim has been achieved because all the contributors to the volume have engaged in meticulous research to offer new items of knowledge about interpreting and interpreters in the past (with the exception of Antony Pym's contribution dealing with a contemporary historical event). The ten chapters offer stimulating reading in the growing area of the 'History of Interpreting'. Central issues of interpreting practice such as loyalty, neutrality, invisibility, ethics and training were already relevant in the past and learning how they were addressed provides us with valuable information to better understand and reflect on how the interpreter's role developed. There are common features that can be recognised, regardless of place or time, for example, in the first five chapters. Here, a recurrent theme is that bilingual, or even trilin-

gual skills, were often a means to acquire a higher social status, either as officials in administration or diplomacy, or even in independent posts as trade brokers or intercultural mediators enjoying privileges and autonomy in their choices and decisions: their title often became hereditary in many cultures of the past.

Rachel Lung opens the collection drawing on the earliest data provided herein. Her contribution takes us back to ancient China at the end of the first millennium. Her attention is first directed to the definition of 'interpreter', its use and significance, with special focus on Sillan interpreters. The historical data stem from the diary of the Japanese Monk Ennin during his stay in China in the second half of the first millennium. The thirty-eight references in Ennin's travelogue are a precious historical source for learning about Sillan interpreters and interpreting at that time in China. Using quantitative and qualitative analysis, Lung defines specific categories of interpreters, their identities, roles and concrete tasks in East Asian exchanges. Analysis of the travelogue reveals that Sillan interpreters accomplished multiple tasks: liaising and transferring messages as independent agents; or handling logistics problems; or sometimes also acting as trade brokers. Surprisingly, in the monk's account there is no reference to interpreting: interpreters' tasks were mainly beyond the linguistic sector leading to the question as to whether 'Sillan interpreter' "might have meant something else other than sheer language mediation at the time" (p. 14).

Alonso-Araguás Iciar examines in the second chapter how interpreting practices in early colonial Mexico underwent a rapid evolution "toward the establishment of a series of official positions under specific regulations" (p. 28). Primary sources consulted include chronicles of the Indies, legal documents and historical archives, with the aim of comparing the linguistic strategies employed during the first voyages of discovery and the early colonial administration of the Spanish overseas colonies. The first period was characterised by the use of captives as interpreters – young natives were kidnapped and used on site as guides and language mediators – or instead by forcing local people to learn Spanish, taking them to imperial administrative centres or to the Court in Spain. Both methods were customary solutions already adopted in previous voyages of exploration. New solutions to overcome the language barrier were found in the second period, when the colonial administration was established and required institutionalised contacts between locals and administrators in the fields of justice and law, tax collection, or for activities related to the Catholic Church. At the time, language skills became an asset for improving social status. Intermediaries, often native Indians or mestizos, would eventually become staff interpreters in the *Audencias*, a new form of administration in New Spain. Alonso-Araguás provides a detailed account of staff interpreters in the colonial administration describing the evolution of language intermediaries and their growing importance, reflected in the inclusion of interpreting practices in fourteen specific ordinances of the *Compilation of Laws of the Indies*.

Chapter three by Marcos Sarmiento-Pérez is dedicated to the role of interpreters in the activities of the Spanish Inquisition. A detailed introduction to the Inquisition lays out its composition and geographical, historical and social areas of activity, as well as the crimes it pursued. The *Archivo Histórico Nacional* or man-

uscripts from the British Library were used as primary sources, while secondary sources have been consulted to illustrate the institution. The Inquisition's activities were multilingual and interpreters were needed at all stages of trials. Sarmiento-Pérez identifies three categories of interpreters working for the Inquisition: occasional interpreters, regular interpreters and official interpreters. The latter had to satisfy specific requirements, were expressly appointed and enjoyed a number of privileges and exemptions.

The importance of historical novels to understand how interpreters are located within a particular historical and social context is discussed by Torikai Kumiko. The chapter illustrates how the novelist Yoshimura Akira has portrayed *Oranda Tsiji* interpreters i.e. Japanese interpreters in Dutch, based in Nagasaki during the end of the Edo Period, in pre-modern Japan. The four novels discussed are based on real characters and the author has conducted in-depth research on their lives with the help of historical accounts and much fieldwork. These interpreters were at the same time translators, accomplishing multiple tasks in trade and diplomacy, but also in academic work and strongly influenced intercultural communication. The author examines the pros and cons of her approach and how historical novels may help us comprehend the life and work of past interpreters. In addition to historical facts, they can help to understand interpreters' personalities and inner feelings.

In the past, interpreting services were often the first step in a diplomatic career, as illustrated in the chapter by David Sawyer devoted to the history of the U.S. Department of State's Corps of Student Interpreters, established in 1902. The aim of the Corps was the professional training of future interpreters to support the United States Consular and Diplomatic Services in China, Japan and Turkey. The author based his investigation on primary sources from Consular and Diplomatic Services documents, Acts of Congress, documents related to appointment and promotion in the Corps, selection and advancement criteria, together with reports and memoirs of the participants. The Corps was first established and implemented in China, which was the most successful part of the Corps and on which the chapter is focused. In their personal accounts, participants describe the difficulties connected with the language acquisition process: interpreting was mainly used to support language learning, while later it was practised in the field. The program was closed in 1924 and, similarly to what happened in other countries after World War II, the training of interpreters in the U.S. was to become independent, separated from the training of diplomats.

In chapter six Sergei Chernov deals with the origin of simultaneous interpreting in the USSR. The analysis of records from Russian archives proves that simultaneous interpretation was concurrently invented and implemented in the USSR and in Western Europe. While Edward Filene had contacts with the Secretary-General of the League of Nations in order to propose his prototype system in 1925, Dr V.Z. Epshtein was proposing "an apparatus for translation from all languages" (p. 141) to the Comintern. Dr Epshtein's system was improved by engineer Isaac Goron and implemented during the 6th Comintern Congress in 1928. The author provides a detailed description of the first version of the system and of the necessary modifications and improvements which allowed its practi-

cal use, as well as an accurate explanation of the three-year observation and evaluation of some aspects linked to simultaneous interpretation, such as quality of interpreters' performance and interpreters' selection and training.

The dawn of simultaneous interpretation constitutes the element of continuity with chapter seven, in which Jesús Baigorri-Jalón discusses the use of photographs as historical sources in general, and in particular, in the introduction of simultaneous interpretation at the UN. Photographs offer to the observer's eyes what historical documents can only describe through words, albeit in a very detailed way. Therefore, they are an essential part of historical research, although sometimes a neglected one. Nevertheless, photographs are neither objective nor truthful images of reality, but the result of a series of choices on the part of the photographer, in other terms, a construction. The author assumes this precise methodological approach, namely, considering photos as artifacts representing other artifacts (events) and pursuing particular goals (e.g. "possibly disseminate the Organisation's wide range of activities and to keep a record of its institutional memory", p. 171). Against this background Baigorri-Jalón devotes the remaining part to the analysis of a number of photos about interpreting and interpreters at the UN. The author aims at showing the impact that such an analysis can have on historical research in interpreting, provided that the researcher takes care to situate photographs "in time and space through a detailed exploration of the context in which they were produced" (p. 188).

Following the last two chapters, focused on the dawn of simultaneous interpretation in two different contexts, the reader has the opportunity to glean deeper insight into the risks and inauspicious destiny of interpreters after World War II. The figure of the interpreter as a neutral person "in the middle" is wiped out in the two contributions from Shi-Chi Mike Lan (chapter eight) and Kayoko Takeda (chapter nine). Shi-Chi Mike Lan provides an accurate framework of the war crimes trials the allied countries conducted against 173 Taiwanese who had served in the Japanese army during World War II. Among the Taiwanese war criminals convicted or even sentenced to death, there were people "officially designated as 'interpreters'" (p. 195) who served under the Japanese military police (*kempeitai*) and Taiwanese who, because of their language knowledge, had *ad hoc* interpreting assignments. The author conducts a rigorous analysis of official documents and trial proceedings which allows him to identify the reasons at the base of the Taiwanese interpreters' conviction. None of the Taiwanese official or *ad hoc* interpreters were brought to trial or convicted because of their interpreting activities, but by virtue of the fact that their status as interpreters "did play a significant role in bringing or forcing a good number of civilian Taiwanese into their involvement in the alleged war crimes" (p. 218). Whether or not Taiwanese interpreters fulfilled their interpreting tasks willingly or unwillingly, they "took the responsibilities of the Japanese military's crime and suffered the consequences" (p. 219).

Depending on time and context language proficiency turns out to be an asset or a burden. This is what Kayoko Takeda describes in a very effective way dealing with the history of Japanese interpreters in the postwar occupation period (1945-1952) compared to the wartime period. If interpreters who served in the

Imperial Japanese Army during the war were brought to trial and convicted by the allied countries in and outside Japan, former Japanese military personnel and Japanese civilians began to work as interpreters during the occupation period for the allied powers. The author examines in depth two emblematic situations of the postwar period: the complex relation between Japanese interpreters and war crimes trials, and interpreting for the foreign military occupiers as a job opportunity to fight against hunger in devastated postwar Japan. It is worth mentioning that at that time interpreting was an unexpected job opportunity for women to improve their status in society. In Takeda's contribution, interpreting is portrayed in its whole and present complexity: interpreting where, when and for whom? These questions seem to come to the surface and impose themselves with all their ethical strength. They remind the reader of the unavoidable human dimension of every interpreting task.

This human dimension is highlighted in Antony Pym's contribution (chapter ten) in which the interpreter is not only understood within her/his professional identity, but first of all and foremost, as a human being embedded in a determined social context. The author scrupulously analyses the components of an interpreter-mediated interaction between a U.S. sergeant and a village inhabitant in a conflict zone such as Afghanistan, and identifies participants' different interests and backgrounds – including those of the interpreter – which largely determine their communicative intention. The analysis of this high-risk case study gives rise to a series of remarks on interpreters' status and the best practices they should follow. Drawing upon the outcomes of the analysis, in his conclusive notes, Antony Pym reflects on the sense that covering a history of interpreters can have: “the writing of the history itself is one way of actually constituting the identity and culture of the profession” (p. 263). In this approach, knowledge of the past and an awareness of the complexity of present-day interpreter-mediated interactions, converge towards a better understanding of interpreting dynamics in different contexts. Therefore, highlighting certain aspects (e.g. status, role, training, pay grade...) could contribute to a re-distribution and a mitigation of the personal risks interpreters face on a daily basis.

In this volume, methodology is a priority issue. Different primary and secondary historical sources, such as records from archives, photographs and personal accounts, are meticulously analysed taking carefully into account the time and space contexts in which they were produced. Thanks to this approach, interpreting practices are studied and analysed against their historical background contributing to greater awareness of the historical nature of every interpreting theory and practice, and of the identity and role of interpreters. The History of Interpreting is the topic pursued by the contributions making up the volume, but it is portrayed as the knowledge necessary to raise awareness on what interpreters were, are and, perhaps, will or would like to be.