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Conference Interpreting in the First International Labor Conference (Washington, D. C., 1919)

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RÉSUMÉ

L'interprétation de conférence a débuté en 1919 à la Conférence de la paix de Paris où la Ligue des Nations (LN) et ses organes, la Cour permanente de justice internationale et l'Organisation internationale du travail (OIT), ont été conçus comme les instruments d'une nouvelle diplomatie qui exercerait désormais au moyen de conférences. C'est alors qu'a pris fin le quasi-monopole du français comme langue de la diplomatie et que sont apparus les interprètes, médiateurs interlinguistiques. Cet article examine le contexte de la Conférence internationale du travail (CIT) à Washington en 1919, les services d'interprétation et les conditions de travail des interprètes, et propose quelques conclusions. Les sources consultées comprennent les procès-verbaux publiés des réunions plénières de la CIT et une série de documents non publiés issus des fichiers du personnel et des archives de l'OIT et de la LN à Genève.

ABSTRACT

Conference interpreting began at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, where the League of Nations (LN) and its offsprings, the Permanent Court of International Justice and the International Labour Organization (ILO), were designed as tools of a new diplomacy by conferences. This meant the end of the virtual monopoly of French as the language of diplomacy and the presence of interpreters mediating between languages. This paper examines the context of the 1919 Washington International Labor Conference (ILC), the interpreting services, the interpreters' working conditions, and proposes some conclusions. Sources include published records of the plenary meetings of the Washington ILC and unpublished documents from the Personnel files and other material from the archives of the ILO and the LN in Geneva.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

conference interpreting, interpretation history, interpreters' working conditions, official languages

The 1919 Washington International Labor Conference

The 1919 Paris Peace Treaty provided that the first ILC was to be held in Washington in October 1919, probably "as a compliment to the Americans and an honour especially to President Wilson, who at the time was in the heyday of his power and popularity" (Barnes 1926: 57). The ILC lasted from October 29 till November 29, 1919, with delegations of up to 39 participating governments, as well as workers' and employers' representatives. Its preliminary work was entrusted to an Organizing Committee, which met during three months in London and Paris (Hetherington: 44). The Committee prepared draft reports on the items in the Conference agenda (the eight-hour day, unemployment, the employment of women and children, etc.), to be discussed

in Washington. These issues were extremely sensitive, as they related to the national legislation of many countries, whose labor laws would be affected by the decisions approved at the Conference. Differences were eventually overcome because “[t]he period of preparation for the Washington Conference and the Conference itself was a period of hope and enthusiasm for international labor reform unparalleled in the history of the world” (Wilson 1934: 194).

From the linguistic standpoint, this Conference can be considered a pioneering experiment of multilingual international conference, since “it had to explore the whole technique of its procedure, and learn to accommodate itself to the many exigencies of a polyglot assembly,” so that “no future Conference will have to spend so long a time in learning the conditions and the routine of its work” (Hetherington: 104). The ILO “initiated the functioning of the League of Nations System,” as “it began to function before the Treaty of Versailles came into effect (and therefore before the LN came into existence)” (Wilson 1934: 82).

Official and non-official languages

The preparatory body, the Commission on International Labor Legislation, began its work in February 1919 with French as its main working language, although “the settlement of the question of the official language should be left to the Peace Conference” (Loucheur, *ILO Official Bulletin*, meeting 1 February 1919: 5). In the discussions which preceded the 1919 Paris Peace Conference it was quite clear that the virtual monopoly of French as the language of diplomacy was a thing of the past. English was admitted on an equal footing in the negotiations, and both French and English were to be the official languages of the LN, and hence of the 1919 ILC. Article 11 of the draft Standing Orders of the Conference provides:

The French and English languages shall be the official languages of the conference. Speeches in French shall be summarized in English and vice versa by an interpreter belonging to the secretariat of the conference. A delegate may speak in his own language, but his delegation must provide for the translation of a summary of his speech into one of the two official languages by an interpreter attached to the delegation. The summary thus translated will then be rendered in the other official language by an interpreter belonging to the secretariat. All documents, resolutions, reports, etc., circulated to the members of the conference by the secretariat shall be rendered in both French and English. Each delegation has the right to have documents circulated in its own language, but the secretariat of the conference will not be responsible for their translation. (*Draft Standing Orders*, [1919] 1920: 219) (This and all the following quotations from meetings are taken from League of Nations, 1920).

However, unlike its Paris counterpart, the Washington Conference was attended not only by diplomats and government representatives, whose linguistic skills were taken for granted, but also by delegates of employers’ and workers’ organizations. Thus, “[t]he fundamental difficulty with the Labor Conference as far as languages are concerned is that the workers’ group for the most part is not bi-lingual” (Wilson 1934: 119). These difficulties were pointed out by concerned delegations and by the ILC President:

Mr. TAYERLE (Czecho-Slovakia). We whose mother tongue is not the official language of the conference are naturally in a rather more difficult position than others. It is

obviously impossible for all languages to be recognized here. We have assembled to solve questions which should unite and not divide the nations. For this reason I will consent to make only what I consider the most essential remarks, in order not to delay the work of the conference. I will make these remarks in French and beg to be forgiven for any grammatical errors. [...] (8th sess., Nov. 6: 54)

The PRESIDENT [W.B. Wilson, US Labor Secretary] [in reply to Czecho-Slovakia] May I call the attention of the conference to a situation which we will undoubtedly be frequently confronted with, and that is the difficulty of thinking in one language, writing in another with which we are not very familiar, and then having that writing translated into a third language. I feel that many of the members of the conference will appreciate the difficulties under which the representative from Czecho-Slovakia is laboring. (8th sess., Nov. 6: 55)

Obviously, it is one thing to be able to say a few words in a foreign language and something totally different to be able to use it at a public meeting. In one instance the President of the meeting, Jules Carlier, from Belgium, asks a Dutch representative, Oudegeest, to speak in French. His reply is very clear: "That is utterly impossible for me. I can say a few words in French, but I cannot use the language in a meeting" (22nd sess., Nov. 27: 163).

According to the records, Spanish, Italian and Dutch were used, in addition to the two official languages, in the plenary meetings and presumably in other meetings too. In such cases, the delegation speaking the non-official language should provide interpretation into French or English.

The interpretation services

Interpreters in this conference were a prominent feature, since they had to interpret all the statements made in the plenary meetings and the commissions. The records, however, omit this fact, except on very few occasions, and then without mentioning the names of the interpreters. The "memoirs" of the Conference, published by different participants, do not mention any interpreters' names, with the exception of Hetherington (1920). Identifying those anonymous voices has required a great deal of research in the LN archives in Geneva.

Under article 11 of the Conference Standing Orders, there were two types of interpreters from the administrative point of view: those provided by the secretariat – who interpreted between the two official languages, English and French – and those supplied directly by delegations, who worked from the original into one of the official languages and, presumably vice versa too, for the benefit of their delegations. The distinction, in terms of previous background in interpretation, would be difficult to make, since neither the secretariat's nor the delegations' interpreters had much professional experience. Among those attached to delegations, Hetherington (1920: 137, 143) mentions H. H. Schroeder, a secretary in the Danish Ministry of the Interior, and Olivia Rossetti Agresti, who held the same position in the Italian Ministry of the Interior. As far as we know, Rossetti Agresti, of the Anglo-Italian family made famous, among others, by the painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Madariaga: 107) was the only female interpreter at the Conference.

In the delegation lists of Ecuador, Spain, Argentina, Paraguay, Cuba or the Netherlands, some of whose representatives spoke quite often in their native tongues, no

explicit mention is made of interpreters. In such cases, interpreting was performed by advisers, as in this intervention from a Cuban delegate: “I shall speak only a few minutes in the Spanish language, and I have asked one of the advisers of the Cuban delegation to translate my remarks. (Further remarks in Spanish) [...]” (19th sess, Nov. 25: 131). Or by the delegates themselves, as indicates one of the secretariat interpreters:

Le nombre des interprètes devint insuffisant lorsque se réunirent les différentes commissions et sous commissions et le service de l'interprétation dans ces réunions fut souvent fait par les délégués eux mêmes. (A la Commission du Chômage, par exemple, le président M. Max Lazard fit plusieurs fois l'interprète, ce qui provoqua un incident assez vif entre ce dernier et Monsieur Guérin). (Hand-written report by Joucla-Pelous, January 3, 19[20] (he wrote 1919 by mistake), File Joucla-Pelous)

So it is difficult to tell how many people acted as *de facto* interpreters in the Conference, but it seems that the number of secretariat interpreters was, at any rate, insufficient to cover all the needs.

Recruitment

In 1919 – as was the case for a good part of the 20th century – there were no interpretation schools or professional directories to look to for interpreters. The pioneers of conference interpreting started by happenstance. The First World War (WWI) interallied committees were a good testing ground for would-be linguists (Herbert: 5). Many were polyglots for a variety of reasons (children of mixed marriages, migration, education, etc.) and their linguistic skills were sometimes used in the home front by different ministries, for example for propaganda (Rock & Larson 1939). Others learned the languages or perfected them during the conflict, as happened with Léon Dostert, the French-American who introduced simultaneous interpretation in Nuremberg and in the UN (MacDonald: 9-10). But, although the WWI played an important training role for some, it was the peace process after the Armistice that demanded direct communication among the leaders of the Allied Powers, who were to chart the new international order. It was the new post-WWI “diplomacy by conference” (Hankey 1946) that increased the demand for “conference services,” including translation, interpretation and verbatim records.

Although the ILO was to be an independent body, the recruitment of translators and interpreters for the Washington Conference was done by the LN Secretariat. A British captain, Arnould, coordinated the offers of appointment and travel arrangements of the translators and interpreters (*File Arnould*). Selection tests for staff interpreters and translators in the LN began in December 1919 (Parodi 1921). The recruitment procedure applied for the Washington Conference temporary contracts, was essentially based on the recommendation by a member of the emerging international civil service who knew the candidate. Joucla-Pelous was recommended by Jean Monnet, Belleau by Paul Mantoux, Peirce and Abraham had worked for their respective delegations in Paris, others came from the army. Interpreters received temporary contracts of approximately two months (from their departure till they came back home) at a salary rate of 500 pounds sterling a year, plus a first class ticket to the United States and a daily allowance to cover all their expenses. These generous conditions

prove the high consideration the job deserved. In fact, interpretation owed its prestige to the outstanding performance of interpreters such as Paul Mantoux and Gustave Camerlynck at the Paris Peace Conference, and also to the extremely limited number of people capable of interpreting. Candidates were required to have: 1) an excellent – active – command of French and English; 2) a vast extralinguistic knowledge in different fields; 3) knowledge of the Conference issues: “accurate and immediate interpretation of speeches in the Labor Conference and the Governing Body required familiarity with the subjects around which international labor action revolved” (Wilson 1934: 84); and 4) public speaking skills as well as a certain psychological and moral stature (Sanz 1931: 310-313).

The interpreters recruited for the Washington Conference had different professional backgrounds, although all shared a common social status (well educated, middle to high class), the linguistic skills and the disruptions caused by the WWI. Velleman and Peirce came from the teaching profession. Velleman had a long career as School Director, University lecturer and researcher (Baigorri, 1998). Peirce had been with the American delegation in Paris, and previously he had been instructor of French in Yale and Professor of Romance languages in Ohio State University (*File Peirce*). Thudicum also had an academic and teaching background (Doctor with a thesis entitled *Calvin als Pädagoge*) (*File Thudicum*). Ronzevalle was a linguist who spoke 12 modern languages (*File Ronzevalle*). Others came directly with their military rank, as they were still mobilized or had just been demobilized. Captain Abraham had worked in the Paris Conference as secretary – and sometimes as interpreter – for the British delegation; he had previously served in the Indian Civil Service for ten years (*File Abraham*). Captain Blennerhassett had been decorated in the campaign against the bolsheviks in Russia (*File Blennerhassett*). Belleau had a Law degree from Laval University, studied languages, travelled extensively and had the rank of captain during the War (*File Belleau*). Fatio had been working in the field of banking in Geneva and New York (*File Fatio*).

Working conditions

We know little about the interpreters' working conditions but we can assume they were rather strenuous, as interpreters were too few for the number of meetings and in all likelihood they also had to do written translation work. There was a chief-interpreter, in charge of the secretariat interpreters' assignments, but we do not know for certain who the chief-interpreter was: Peirce or Velleman (Baigorri 1998: 26). For many, Washington was their first opportunity to actually interpret in a conference and their training took place on the job. They had some pre-session time for preparation. In those days, transatlantic travel was by boat and lasted several days, which were paid as working days. That time allowed many to become familiar with the Conference subjects. Besides, interpreters arrived in Washington a few days before the meetings began, and the written translation tasks they were assigned surely contributed to their training.

Under the rules of procedure, speeches delivered in one of the two official languages were to be *summarized* in the other by an interpreter of the secretariat. Interpreters were expected to convey the general sense and not a verbatim rendition of

the original speech. Conference organizers and participants were well aware of the problem posed –in terms of time, and indirectly, of money – by the official bilingualism of the proceedings. This awareness was even clearer when a third (non-official) language was involved and calls were made to use one of the two official languages instead.

The PRESIDENT [Barnes, G.B.] [After an intervention presumably in Spanish, although the record does not state so] While the interpreters are getting the hang of this [proposals of amendments in the language of a resolution] let me say that I hope if there are any further Spanish speakers who can speak French, they will put their speeches in French and save the time of the conference. [...] (23rd sess., Nov. 28: 174)

Conference officials and delegates abided by the rule of providing interpretation of every speech uttered in the assembly hall, but the records show that exceptions were made, in order to save the “translation” time, which was considered in the following instance as a hindrance to the deliberations rather than as “actual work.”

Mr. SHAW. I was going to suggest to you, Mr. Chairman, that as Mr. Jouhaux has read all this and as I am reading it in English, that my remarks need not be translated at all; that they will appear in the report; and that Mr. Jouhaux’s explanatory remarks will also appear in the report and the delegates might be satisfied and we might get to actual work at our next sitting. [...] (9th sess., Nov. 7: 63)

The modality used to interpret into and between the two official languages was short consecutive, which rendered an abbreviated version of successive short portions of the original speech, at least once the difficulties experienced in the early stages of the Conference were over:

Mr. BUTLER (Secretary of the Committee on Organization). The first question which I wish to bring to the attention of the conference is about interpretation. It would greatly facilitate the proceedings if delegates would divide their speeches into periods as far as possible and allow the interpreter to translate at the end of each period. Unless this is done, interpretations are liable to be inaccurate and give a false impression of the speaker’s meaning. In this morning’s session the interpreters found that they had difficulty in interpreting correctly some of the speeches that were made, because they were too long, and that they had forgotten the precise wording that had been used at the beginning of the speech by the time that they came to translate it at the end. (2nd sess., Oct. 29: 16)

The PRESIDENT [W.B. Wilson, US Secretary of Labor] May I suggest that it would facilitate an understanding of the discussion if the periods are made shorter and the translation made as we proceed, in shorter periods than we have been in the habit of making them. (3rd sess., Oct. 30: 21)

The absence of this kind of comment in later phases of the Conference seems to indicate that speakers adapted to the pace required by the interpreters, that the audience got used to the pauses for interpretation and that interpreters improved their technique and were able to cope with longer chunks of speech at a time. No indication is made in the records regarding note-taking by interpreters as a means for their rendering of speeches, but we can assume that they took notes and that they improved their note-taking technique as the Conference went on (Sanz, 1931: 308-309; Mantoux 1955: 1: 7).

Meetings at the Conference had different formats: plenary, committees, subcommittees, all of which required linguistic services. As regards speeches, it must have become increasingly clear that certain interventions, particularly those that speakers read and those of a delicate drafting nature, required an extra effort on the part of interpreters and were not always crowned with success.

Interpreters brought by delegations would act not only for them, but presumably for the rest of the delegations too, when a statement was made in a language other than the official ones. In these cases, we can assume that two modalities were used: a type of *chuchotage* from one of the official languages into the non-official one as had been the case in the Paris Conference (Bonsal: 23, 72), and consecutive when the speech was given originally in the non-official language.

Technical conditions

Acoustics. There is no clear indication in the sources as to the sound equipment, if any, used during the Conference, but according to plenary meeting records listening conditions in the assembly hall were far from ideal. On numerous occasions difficulties were experienced—especially from certain areas of the hall—to hear the interventions and to follow the debate. Poor acoustics were in part due to the consecutive interpretation itself, as conversations would continue while a “foreign” language was being spoken. In an instance, the President interrupts the speaker to “ask delegates to listen attentively, and to suspend private conversation in order to give Miss Constance Smith the opportunity of making her argument heard.” (15th sess., Nov. 20: 102). In another meeting, a delegate from South Africa complains: “Mr. Chairman, we would like to hear the amendment read again. We cannot hear anything at this end of the hall.” (7th sess., Nov. 5: 50) Two days later, the Conference Secretary General announces that “the seating arrangements have been entirely altered with a view to overcoming, if possible, the difficulties which were experienced by some of the delegates seated at the farthest end of the room. The rearrangement is experimental, and I should be glad to have expressions of opinion at the end of this session as to whether this seating is more convenient than the old arrangement.” (9th sess., Nov. 7: 57)

In these other cases appeals to order are made:

The PRESIDENT [Barnes, G.B.] [...] I am told by a gentleman on the left that it is very difficult for him to hear what is going on, because of conversations around the center of the floor. Might I appeal to the delegates to be quiet during the proceedings, so that those at the extremities, at both ends, may hear what is going on? (21st sess., Nov. 26: 149)

The PRESIDENT [G. N. Barnes, G.B.] Might I make an appeal to the conference [after a vote] to sit down and keep in order? It is impossible for a person to be heard while conversation and moving about are going on. (23rd sess., Nov. 28: 170)

These hearing difficulties, related to the far from orderly environment in some of the meetings, would be one of the strong arguments used by advocates of the simultaneous interpretation system a few years later (Filene’s letter, April 2, 1925 [*File Filene*]; Lord Cecil’s report, ca. June 1930 [*File Simultaneous interpretation*]).

Accents. A number of delegates had to speak in a foreign language and that meant that a great variety of accents was heard. Records do not state the language of the

speaker, except when a non-official one is used, but according to different indications a majority of delegates used French as their foreign communication language. Naturally, there must have been very different French tonalities in the accent of delegates from Greece, the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia or Spain, to name but a few examples. As Bonsal (1944: 62) puts it talking about the Paris Conference held earlier that year, "...I, alas! have to put into plain English speeches that are often made in the barbaric French of Warsaw, of Zagreb, of Belgrade, and, worst of all, the French of Crete."

There are examples in which the speakers themselves are very aware of their limited command of the foreign language: "Mr. GONDRA (Paraguay – remarks in Spanish). As there is no interpreter present, I am going to attempt to translate my remarks myself. First of all, I must beg the pardon of the French delegates for using such execrable French. [...]" (18th sess., Nov. 25: 130) Cases such as this were undoubtedly a good training ground for interpreters, who acquired a special skill of understanding accents which would be incomprehensible for the average native speaker. In this context, we find particularly illustrative the instance mentioned before when a Dutch workers' delegate refuses to speak French in the meeting. The interpreter, exceptionally quoted on the record, tries to help and suggests he speak in French, because no matter the imperfections he surely will understand.

The INTERPRETER. The interpreter would understand you well enough to be able to translate you.

Mr. OUDEGEEST. No; it is quite impossible. [Continues in Dutch] [...] (22nd sess., Nov. 27: 163)

The idea that interpreters are better skilled than many native speakers at understanding the language spoken with a foreign accent is common knowledge in the profession nowadays, but the words of that anonymous interpreter were pronounced in 1919, when the job description was still very unclear.

Feedback and quality control. References about quality do not abound in the sources. The overall evaluation of the interpreters' performance was generally very positive as some of the closing speeches of the Conference attest:

Mr. CARLIER (Belgium). And I wish [...] not to forget the interpreters, of whom we have been the often extremely hard and exacting taskmasters. [...]

Mr. OUDEGEEST (Netherlands – remarks in Dutch) [...] and we also owe it [the result of the Conference] to the faithful work done by the numerous secretarial staff [...] (closing session, Nov. 29: 200)

However, some difficulties and even a few interpretation mistakes were reported in the verbatim records of the plenary meetings. Most errors had to do with accuracy in the wording, hardly a strange problem since many interventions were read statements of carefully drafted legal texts in one language.

Mr. FONTAINE (France) [...] I beg leave to make an observation about the text relating to sailors. [...] [Mr. Fontaine remarked to the interpreter that he did not know how to translate into English the word 'mariniers' because in French the word 'mariniers' applies to persons working on inland waterways.] (17th sess., Nov. 24: 122)

Certainly, trial and error must have taught interpreters and users some of the rules that govern the interpretation of texts meant to be read and not listened to, let alone interpreted. But there is at least one case of unmet expectations, according to these

comments: Apart from being “quite incapable of acting as an interpreter on account of his insufficient knowledge of English,” Joucla-Pelous considered that his mission was to be “attached to the French Delegation,” which was a totally irregular arrangement in the Conference (Letter from H.B. Butler, Conference Secretary-General, to Sir Eric Drummond, Secretary-General of the LN, November 14, 1919, *File Joucla-Pelous*).

Conclusions

The first ILC held in Washington in 1919 was one of the first cases in history in which multinational and multilingual conversation took place on such a scale. Long-term results of the conference were that interpreting, essentially between the two official languages, became a routine feature in conferences. That is, people became accustomed to the procedure of listening to the interpretation in order to follow the debates. The key link in the communication chain was the interpreter, who, without formal specialized training, started practising on stage. The fact that the proceedings were conducted in a “smooth” manner proves that the interpreters’ performance reached the expected quality standards. Admittedly, neither the audience nor the interpreters themselves had much experience in the field, but it is equally true that the Conference served as a pioneer experiment in the learning process for all sides of the communication chain.

The recruitment of interpreters was done on an *ad hoc* basis and this Washington Conference set the pace for future ILCs and other international conferences. The ILO had staff translators, but no staff interpreters. It always resorted to occasional or freelance interpreters thus contributing to the development of the profession throughout the 1920s and 1930s in the context of the increasing number of international multilingual conferences.

Interpreters in the Conference carried with them a linguistic capital derived from their education, but it was by chance that they had the right language combination and that they were required to interpret, since up until then French was *the* diplomatic language and they had not trained for that job. This conference represents a turning point regarding the international hierarchy of languages. French and English – and to a lesser extent Spanish – consolidated a position as vehicular languages in international labor affairs. But the growing importance of English increased as an international language and forecast a future that is now present.

The contours of the profession of conference interpreter were not fully delineated yet and there was still a long way to go to define the professional, social and academic characteristics of conference interpreting. For many years only real experience continued to serve as a test of the ability to do the job.

Interpreting at the Washington ILC meant the democratization of international fora, since it allowed communication to a group, the workers, who had been condemned to silence in international affairs due to their lack of linguistic competence in the vehicular language. Finally, workers’ participation was a decisive factor in making the ILO the first international organization to make an attempt at simultaneous interpreting in the late 1920s with as many as seven languages at a time (Baigorri, 2000: 173-191).

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