Conference interpreters: a snapshot of the profession (Antony Hoyte-West)

In this post, Antony Hoyte-West outlines an important but often-overlooked aspect of multilingual conferences... the interpreters!

Although simultaneous interpreting has been around since the Nuremberg Trials at the end of World War Two, conference interpreters still retain a sense of mystique. To outsiders, the ability to listen to one language and speak in another at the same time seems almost otherworldly. Yet is it a skill that can be acquired, typically through a one-year postgraduate training programme (such as the EMCI) for students who are already fluent in at least one language in addition to their native tongue.

Two main kinds of interpreting are commonly used at conferences: consecutive – which is where the interpreter takes notes whilst the original speaker is talking, and then interprets immediately afterwards – and simultaneous, where the interpretation takes place in real time using relevant technology. Where possible, conference organisers tend to opt for the simultaneous mode as it saves time, but consecutive can be used in situations where headsets and interpreting booths are otherwise unavailable.
At international institutions such as the EU, interpreters commonly only work into their native language from two or more passive languages. On the private market, however, the vast majority of interpreters work between their mother tongue and another language in both directions (e.g. from English into Spanish and from Spanish into English). For many conference organisers, this is also the most cost-effective way of ensuring multilingual provision.

Unlike translators, who typically specialise in a given area such as finance, tourism, or medicine, interpreters tend to be generalists. As both academic and policy-based conferences can usually be extremely technical, this means that good general knowledge and the ability to do lots of research are key. When preparing, it’s important to gain as much information as possible about the conference topic and the speakers. This can include making multilingual glossaries of useful terminology, as well as reading scholarly articles. It’s always best to ensure speakers are aware that their presentation will be interpreted, and to that end AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, produces some useful guidelines. From the interpreter’s perspective, it’s always easiest to work from speakers who are speaking freely, with minimal notes; if a text is to be read out, it’s always extremely helpful to obtain a copy beforehand.

For decades, the main conference languages tended to be major international languages such as English, French, and Spanish. However, the expansion of the EU to include 24 official languages has ensured that interpreting provision for smaller languages such as Estonian, Maltese, and Slovene is now available. One of the more recent additions to the EU’s translation and interpreting landscape is Irish, which became an official EU language in 2007, and is the subject of my current research project. At present, even though Irish became an official language fourteen years ago, a shortage of qualified linguists means that it is still subject to special restrictions on its use in the EU institutions. Although these restrictions are scheduled to be lifted at the beginning of 2022, more translators and conference interpreters with the requisite knowledge of Irish are still needed.

With this background, I conducted an interview-based research project with conference interpreters who were active in the Republic of Ireland. My study aimed to see if there were good grounds to state that there was a conference interpreting profession in the country. Indeed, the response from my interviewees was strongly affirmative – although the market was small, it was felt that there was a group of qualified professionals who were providing the necessary linguistic services. In addition, interviewees also felt that they could count on support from professional organisations like the Irish Translators and Interpreters Association.

With regard to the impact of official EU status for Irish on the conference interpreting profession, interviewees felt that this was heavily dependent on whether the conference interpreter had Irish in their language combination. In general terms, though, related media coverage of translators and interpreters was felt to have generally been positive, as borne out by the following study.

Although, as in many countries, interpreting is not a protected profession in the Republic of Ireland, interviewees were broadly optimistic about the future of the domestic conference interpreting profession. They noted that public awareness of their skills and capabilities was growing. In addition, as the research for this study was conducted before Brexit took effect, interviewees also highlighted that the Republic of Ireland’s new status as the largest English-speaking country in the EU might bring more international conferences to the country, thus creating more work opportunities.
Presciently, many participants felt that technology would play an increasingly important role in the conference interpreting profession, particularly with regard to remote and distance interpreting. Indeed, the current COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the profession across the globe. With international travel limited to only essential journeys, many large conferences – the economic and professional lifeblood of conference interpreters – have been cancelled. Although many meetings and symposia have moved online, the need to ensure high-quality multilingual communication remains.

In response, conference interpreters have had to become fluent in the use of remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) technologies. Though technologies such as KUDO and Interprefy existed before the pandemic, increased demand has meant that uptake has skyrocketed. Even international organisations such as the EU and the UN have begun to use RSI, although virtual technologies can also complicate the already challenging task of interpreting simultaneously from one language to another – issues can include poor sound quality, as well as problems with internet speed and power supplies. Although we are all looking forward to the day when in-person conferences will resume, it is certain that online conferences are here to stay. For conference interpreters, it is clear that this will undoubtedly influence the direction of the wider profession over the years to come.

About Antony Hoyte-West

Antony Hoyte-West is a translator, conference interpreter, and interdisciplinary researcher focusing on multilingualism and translation studies. A graduate of the universities of St Andrews, Oxford, and NUI Galway, his research interests include historical and contemporary language policy, the institutional translation of minority languages, and the professional status of translators and interpreters. To date, he has presented his work at a range of international conferences and is also the author of several peer-reviewed publications.