

CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETATION

Can It Survive in the 21st Century?

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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of World War II, when virtually all interpreting was still done in the consecutive mode, simultaneous interpreting has grown dramatically and has crowded consecutive out of the meetings of international organizations and out of the world congresses of businessmen, scientists and professionals. The rise of simultaneous interpreting has yet to slow, fueled by the steady increase in multilingual meetings, the time constraints of television and the advent of teleconferencing. A growing number of young professional conference interpreters now enter the marketplace without any prior training in consecutive.

Many voices in academia and in the interpreting profession itself predict that consecutive interpreting is on its way out. I wish to take issue with this notion and will try to demonstrate why consecutive will continue to play a significant role in the world of the future.

THE DRAMATIC RISE OF SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION

From the beginning of the profession of interpreting until the middle of this century, consecutive interpretation was the standard method employed by the practitioners of the art. The only exception was the occasional use of whispering a running translation when the locale did not permit a loud translation, for instance, during the performance of a play in an auditorium, or when the principal did not want anybody else in the room to hear the translation of privileged information. Whispering a translation, while another person is speaking the original message in his or her tongue at the same time, is, in fact, the forerunner of what today is the preferred and glamorous exercise of most professional interpreters in important public meetings and conferences: simultaneous interpretation. The major difference is today's use of sophisticated technical equipment to separate the voices and languages and to enhance the acoustical reception quality for interpreters and listeners alike.

From the beginning of the profession, interpreters have hated whispering because it is much more strenuous mentally and physically and also less accurate than consecutive interpretation which allows more time for analysis and proper formulation.

Before looking at the spectacular rise of simultaneous interpreting in the last forty years and discussing the current situation and future prospects, a brief discussion of the two techniques is needed for the uninitiated.

Professional interpreting is the art of listening to a spoken statement in one language, analyzing its content, and reproducing exactly the same message with spoken words in another language. The message delivered by the interpreter in the target language must be complete and accurate, with all the nuances and emphases in place, delivered in the same style and tenor. The words used by the interpreter in the target language are frequently different from the words employed in the source language in order to best reproduce the same meaning and feeling in another culture where the same words or constellation of words, if transposed verbatim, will not only create a different flavor but maybe an entirely different meaning.

In consecutive interpreting, the interpreter waits for the speaker to stop after a number of sentences before rendering the statement in the target language from memory and special interpreting notes, based largely on what are called symbols or ideograms. Ideograms represent ideas, concepts and processes, not words. The waiting period allows the interpreter sufficient time for in-depth analysis based on context and other factors and for selecting the best possible formulation in the target language.

In simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter does not wait for the speaker to complete a statement or even a sentence in the source language, but talks at the same time in the target language, just seconds behind the speaker. This method leaves only seconds or even fractions of seconds for the all-important analysis. As a result, the message in the target language will not be as complete and conceptually accurate as in consecutive interpreting and also not as well phrased. Simultaneous interpreting is mostly done from sound-insulated booths from which the translation reaches the listeners for each language via headsets. This method is extremely tiring and interpreters are usually rotated every 20 to 30 minutes, making it also more labor-intensive and costly.

Given these obvious disadvantages for interpreter and listener alike, what has made simultaneous interpreting so popular in the last forty years?

Three events set the stage for the triumphant entry of simultaneous onto the world stage. The founding of the United Nations in 1945, the establishment of NATO in 1949, and the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952, followed by its expansion into the megalopolis of the European Communities in 1967 and later.

For all of its virtues, consecutive interpretation has one major weakness: it is not a practical method of interpretation when more than two languages are involved. Waiting two to five minutes for a polished and reliable translation from Russian into English to reach the English-speaking listener is a reasonable price to pay. The two to five minutes subsequently consumed by the interpreter often are a boon to the speaker or negotiator, who can use the extra time for thinking, plotting strategy, observing the listener, checking his notes, resting his vocal cords. But already with three languages, the time delays become bothersome, if not intolerable. The French-speaking listener does not wish to sit through the English rendition of the Russian and watch a speaker of English react before he even knows what he is reacting to, because the French translation is just starting.

When the United Nations decided to allow five official languages: Chinese, French, English, Russian and Spanish for its discussions, simultaneous interpretation became a necessity. Interestingly, consecutive interpretation upon request was retained as a second option for cases where the accuracy of the simultaneous rendition was in doubt.

The stage for the practical implementation of this new technique had already been set during the Nuremberg war crimes trials in 1945. As far as is known, this was the first full-fledged application of simultaneous for several languages with the use of headsets and microphones. Because the United Nations were founded in the same year, 1945 can fairly be described as the birth year of modern simultaneous interpretation.

From there it took off like a rocket. Many other international organizations, allowing more than two official languages, were founded after WW II. In the fifties and sixties, several university interpreting programs, mostly in Europe, bought the needed equipment, installed interpreting booths and provided training in the new technique. But nothing fueled the simultaneous rocket more than the rapid expansion of the European Communities. From its original four, the Communities went to nine official languages by the end of the eighties. Providing interpreters for the about 9,000 EC meetings a year in 9 languages required small armies of simultaneous interpreters, more than even the numerous interpreting schools in Europe could graduate. The EC had to establish six-month crash courses of its own to turn university graduates into interpreters. By 1990, more than 40% of its staff had been trained in house.

Despite their large staffs of hundreds of interpreters, the United Nations, NATO, and especially the EC as the largest employer of interpreters and translators in the world still needed the assistance of many more hundreds of free-lance interpreters to carry them through the peaks of annual activities and through special meetings and conferences.

Over one thousand of these interpreters, supplemented by a number of staff of international and national organizations, are members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters in Geneva (AIIC), a strong professional organization with considerable influence in shaping working conditions, ethics and equipment standards, and interpreter training in Europe and in other countries.

AIIC's domination by simultaneous interpreters has made the term "conference interpreter" virtually synonymous with "simultaneous interpreter". Conference interpreters who practice mostly consecutive or consecutive only, have become a minority. Most of them are employed by foreign ministries and large corporations. The arms control negotiations between the United States and the former Soviet Union, which led to the SALT and START treaties, employed many consecutive conference interpreters. This assured the total accuracy of important detail and nuances where billions of dollars and millions of lives were at stake and was technically possible because only two languages were involved.

Apart from the establishment of multilingual international organizations, the rise of simultaneous interpreting was greatly aided by the sudden universal presence of television. Seconds count in television. Like simultaneous interpreters, television commentators are used to instant and, of necessity, superficial analysis. The extra time needed for consecutive interpretation is anathema to television producers. Even when the personal interpreter of a political leader is standing ready for a consecutive translation, accurate and free of charge, TV producers prefer to spend a considerable amount of money to have their own simultaneous interpreter in the studio to give an instant rendition, even if it is mediocre by comparison, to save precious minutes for commercials or other features. The instant live transmission via satellite of any program telecast in another language, partially or in full, requires simultaneous interpretation.

The ready availability of simultaneous interpretation in the last 25 years and the fact that major international hotels and conference centers have large auditoriums with built-in interpreting equipment have prompted many international conferences of scientists and other professionals to widen the number of languages in which presentations and interventions may be made. Once several languages have been sanctioned, it is virtually impossible to return to one or two without cries of discrimination. From then on, the practice and expense of simultaneous interpretation become a new tradition. The time savings realized by simultaneous are appealing to busy executives or scientists as long as the loss of quality remains tolerable. Little damage is done to the presentations, which are usually available in writing anyhow. However, during the discussion of sophisticated scientific arguments between the experts precious detail is lost which would have come across in professional consecutive translation.

One recent phenomenon which may further promote the quantity but not the quality of simultaneous interpretation is teleconferencing. While, on the one hand, most teleconferenced events would have been held in simultaneous anyway, had the people been traveling instead of the satellite signals, the relatively high price of satellite time will encourage use of simultaneous even in two-language environments because of the time savings. Simultaneous interpreting quality decreases further in teleconferencing due to a number of additional factors: vexing acoustical problems caused by sunspots and other disturbances, the interpreters' remoteness from the speakers with the accompanying difficulty of reading body language and who is speaking, and from other non-acoustic clues present in the live environment. There is also a psychological problem. Interpreters stay current and sharp by constant reading and traveling in foreign countries. Teleconferencing robs them of travel opportunities with the ready access to on-site local reading and research material. Their motivation will be down and with it their performance.

Finally, the dramatic rise of simultaneous interpreting has been aided by those with tunnel vision who can see the time savings only. These are not only ill-advised businessmen who will entrust sophisticated multimillion dollar negotiations in a two-language environment to the vagaries of simultaneous, but they also include people such as zealous presidential aides. Under the banner of saving time, they have occasionally brought simultaneous interpreting into the sanctum of the Oval Office for one-on-one meetings involving only one foreign language. Having done many meetings for six presidents there myself, mostly in consecutive and at times in simultaneous, I have always felt like a surgeon being given a blunt kitchen knife for a complicated operation when an aide handed me a microphone.

Stuck with instant analysis and having no time for refinement, gone were the crafty inventions of the creative mind which get the subtle points across, gone the security blanket of confirming doubtful concepts from subsequent context, gone the chance to bail out your president when he uses an awkward formulation. By the time you realize which thought he is really trying to formulate, you are yourself too deeply into his tangled web of words to retreat and rearrange them for his and the listener's benefit. The interpreter's task is not to mouth words but to find and explain the meaning behind the words. Time for analysis is the key to accurate interpretation and the magic wand for flawless phrasing in the target language. Why rob the interpreter and the principals of all these riches in the name of saving a few minutes? We would not dream of going to the arrival ceremony on the White House Lawn in crumpled jeans and let everybody decide last second where they want to stand. Then why go inside and interpret in a haphazard manner?

Next to the many new multilingual environments, nothing has promoted the allure of simultaneous interpretation more than the time savings which can be realized -- at a price.

THE SILENT MAJORITY

The dazzling ascent of simultaneous interpreting over the past few decades has mostly occurred in places which are constantly in the public limelight: the United Nations, the European Parliament, NATO, the annual Economic Summits of Industrialized Nations and other international conferences, television interviews of famous foreign personalities. At the same time, the EC, the UN and NATO, in that order, have become the largest employers of staff interpreters in the world.

This seems to have led to a situation where many academics working in the field of interpretation and translation and the simultaneous specialists among the interpreters have crowded out of their consciousness the silent majority of consecutive interpreters who work mostly in the shadows but still outnumber simultaneous interpreters by a factor of at least five to one. Eager to embrace the new opportunities of the marketplace, interpreter training has shifted too far in the direction of simultaneous and has neglected the teaching of consecutive. There are university training programs in the United States which do not bother to teach consecutive interpreting and, if they really wanted to, could not teach it because nobody on the faculty masters the discipline.

If we conceive of interpreting as a pyramid, where the highest paid interpreters are at the top, we would now find only about 20% of the consecutive interpreters in the top third of that pyramid. Those highly skilled consecutive interpreters, who do the majority of their work from memory and notes rather than in the interpreting booth are mostly employed by large corporations and private organizations and by the foreign ministries, which, in the case of the United States, means the Department of State in Washington. Most of the interpreting done in diplomacy around the world is done in consecutive.

When we look at the bottom two-thirds of the pyramid, however, where the interpreting jobs with average pay are located, simultaneous interpreters are far and few between. Virtually all of the thousands of court interpreters working in federal and state courts are consecutive interpreters. The same is true of the thousands of escort and community interpreters who work for exchange programs, travel agencies, hospitals, and emergency services. Most of the interpreters working for the F.B.I. and other law enforcement agencies are consecutive specialists. In the field of arms control, disarmament and dismantlement of weapons, where a few highly skilled consecutive interpreters are paid about \$350.00 per day to assist the negotiators of the big agreements, many hundreds of less well paid consecutive interpreters assist with the enormous task of inspection and verification. In bilingual or multilingual cities such as Miami, San Antonio, Los Angeles, there are hundreds of consecutive interpreters working for small companies, private institutions or in the social services sector.

Despite the massive inroads of simultaneous, at least 80% of all interpreting work in the United States is still done in consecutive, though most professional associations and the college and university interpreter training programs are dominated by simultaneous specialists. Young graduates from those schools are quickly finding out that most of the entry level jobs demand consecutive skills, which many of them were not taught or not taught sufficiently.

Though being a good interpreter is largely based on basic aptitudes (e.g. quick reflexes, poise under pressure, above average analytical skills and creativity) which you must possess from birth and cannot be taught, that aptitude must be developed into reliable professional methodology and into marketable skills. For modern professional interpreting, the college or the university is the ideal training ground for a whole number of reasons which go beyond the scope of this paper.

As reliable analysis of the source message is the key to all good interpreting, consecutive training, which emphasizes analysis above all else, is also the ideal preparation for good simultaneous skills. Naval officers start as cadets on sailing ships to learn to analyze the basic behavior of the ocean and the vessel, all physicians need to study anatomy first. But we are now graduating interpreters without knowledge of the basic anatomy of their highly sophisticated craft.

There is also a fair amount of hybris among the arrived and well-paid interpreters at the top, who often show little regard for the responsibilities of their colleagues in the bottom two-thirds of the pyramid. Many court interpreters have to make lightning-fast interpreting decisions, where a mistake could mean many years of imprisonment versus continued freedom or could make a guilty-as-hell criminal go free. The skills of a community interpreter, roused from her sleep by an emergency room physician, could save or fail to save a human life.

In the profession of interpreting, the silent majority are the consecutive interpreters. At the threshold of the 21st century, they are clearly in great demand in our society. They are also terribly neglected. Let us now examine what their survival prospects for the future might be.

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETATION

Despite the spectacular conquest of a large segment of the interpreting territory by the fashionable and currently much needed technique of simultaneous interpreting, the profession is entering the twenty-first century with the consecutive mode of interpreting dominating most areas of application with the notable exception of large multilingual organizations and gatherings, where most of the high interpreting fees and salaries are now being earned.

As we have seen, the sudden dramatic rise of simultaneous was caused primarily by the establishment of a few important organizations which permitted the use of several official languages, a purpose for which consecutive is not suited. Nobody can say with certainty that these organizations will last. The continued existence of one of the top three, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is currently somewhat in doubt. The League of Nations did not survive. Nobody can say for sure that the United Nations will always be there. Conversely, it may be expected that new multilingual organizations will be formed, offsetting some of the employment territory lost by those who disappear.

Another element of uncertainty is the tremendous cost of providing simultaneous interpreting in so many languages. The budgets of nations and of international organizations are getting leaner. English is becoming more and more the international lingua franca and will now rapidly spread into Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It is conceivable that thirty years from now a large number of international gatherings could be held with English as the only official language. Delegations may arrive with a consecutive interpreter and a translator for the English language rather than contributing large sums of money to an international secretariat for several teams of simultaneous interpreters. We already have a precedent for this with the countries which were formed out of the former Soviet Union. Despite their strong national language ambitions, these republics cannot communicate or conclude binding agreements in many areas without using Russian as the lingua franca, and some of them cannot afford the cost of simultaneous interpretation for major conferences with several languages.

In a seemingly unstoppable progression, the world is becoming more complex and more differentiated. The meaning of spoken statements made by educated people on complex subjects become harder and harder to analyze even for the most skilled and experienced interpreters. The greatest weakness of the simultaneous technique is its lack of analysis time. Without having a printed text in advance, many interpreters dread to enter the interpreting booth on subjects they are not very familiar with. Increasing complexity may no longer be compatible with minimum analysis time in certain environments of the future. In such environments consecutive may become mandatory as it already is in a number of environments today.

Further into the new century, the main driving force for the use of the simultaneous mode may be the considerable time savings which can be accomplished rather than the multitude of official multilingual environments. We are getting a taste of the allure of the time savings in looking at the recent introduction of simultaneous interpreting in a two-language environment by a number of judges and courts. With full dockets and empty purses, a number of judges are trying to resort to simultaneous interpreting, but usually do not wish to spend the money for the needed rotation of interpreters every 30 minutes or so.

Here is an experiment which is certain to fail. Already now, defendants or complainants who cannot present their case in English often will not get an accurate translation in court because so many court interpreters are not sufficiently trained or certified.

This is not the fault of the interpreters. Certification procedures and training facilities for all categories of interpreters are totally inadequate throughout the United States. Some of the few programs which still exist are desperately struggling for survival. They face the additional dilemma that most American-born graduates coming out of the foreign language programs of high schools, colleges and universities do not even come close to the required level of proficiency in the foreign languages to be useful interpreting students. Ironically, this includes some graduates who have been awarded masters degrees in those languages. Though the interpreting schools desperately need the tuition money of those applicants, they have to disqualify them for lack of language proficiency, even if they have interpreting aptitude. One problem is the overabundance of theoretical linguists in the United States. Unable to find work in their field, they go into language teaching and even into interpreting and translating programs without having the needed qualifications. The graduates reflect the proficiency of their teachers.

To return to court interpreting for a moment, many judges have no concept of the mechanics of interpreting and believe that it consists of substituting words in one language for the corresponding words in the other. Their constant interference with the interpreting process and insistence on a "word-for-word" translation is legendary. What little observation of due process is left will go out the window if simultaneous interpreting without proper rotation is used.

At the minimum, the statements made in a foreign language by the accused or the defendant need to be interpreted into English in consecutive in order to allow the interpreter sufficient analysis time to cull the intended meaning from the uttered words which -- in a stressful situation -- often are not chosen well. In the many cases where the semantic images chosen from another culture would be misleading in English, the interpreter can make use of the extra time provided by the consecutive mode to find an equivalent image in the target language or to formulate a paraphrase which is unambiguous and does not lead the listeners in the wrong direction. It should also be noted that interpreters who do not have complete native fluency in English consistently deliver a better interpretation product in the consecutive mode when they work from other languages into English..