Charting the Future of Translation History

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Published by University of Ottawa Press

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Perspectives on the History of Interpretation
Research Proposals

Eighty-five years ago, in 1919, a lawyer from Quebec, Joseph Belleau, was recruited to participate as an interpreter in the first international conference derived from the Paris Peace Conference (even before the League of Nations began its work). This was the Washington Conference, which gave birth to the International Labor Organization (ILO). Belleau's file in the League of Nations archives in Geneva contains just a few documents. From that file and from other documents, we have gathered information about the way interpreting services were organized and provided at that Conference. This information will be published in an article, "Conference Interpreting in the First International Labor Conference (Washington, D. C. 1919)" in a forthcoming issue of *META*. All we know about Belleau, apart from his brief assignment to interpret in Washington, is that he ended up teaching at Laval University. But surely there are documents, maybe a photo, that could help us rebuild the life of this pioneer of conference interpreting, who gave up that still-undefined job to join the academic profession.

This is an example of the huge gap to be filled in the history of our discipline. But our main point here is that such gleanings of information about a temporary interpreter would relate only to his *story* and could be useful only to rebuild his personal biography. If we wanted to make a contribution to the *history* of interpreting, then we would have to trace the ideas Belleau and other interpreters had about interpreting, their profiles, the situation and prospects of the interpreters' freelance market in the 1920s, and so on. And if we wished to translate that material into something relevant for *History*, then we would have to establish the framework in which Belleau's activity took place. In this sense, perhaps it would be important to say that English acquired the status of an official language in the international institutions formed after World War I, following a long period in which French held a virtual monopoly as a diplomatic language. We would also have to mention the fact that the ILO was an institution in the 1920s in which interpreting constituted an element of democratization, since up until then workers did not have a linguistic means of communication that allowed them to feel comfortable in international gatherings. We might also say that the ILO and the League of Nations gave birth to the international civil service, including the roles of translator and interpreter as we know them. And so on.

Interpreting as a trade probably goes back to the early contacts between different human groups in prehistoric times. But interpreting — and translation for that matter — has only recently become a well-defined profession in the understanding of academics, practitioners, and society in general. That explains the relative lack of research in the history of the two fields, particularly when compared with well-established disciplines such as medicine or mathematics (Woodsworth, 1996, 9). Translation and interpreting differ in one important aspect: translation deals with written texts and interpreting with oral speeches (complemented by non-verbal information). Historical research is usually associated with documents, to the extent that we define prehistory as the period from which documents — in a large sense — are not available. Voice-recording devices have existed only since the twentieth century. Therefore, tracing the history of interpreting requires using the few

secondary sources in which some scant information about the job of interpreting and about its practitioners may generally be found. This means that those who embark upon the task of rebuilding the history of interpreting are faced with an additional challenge: that of the sources. It is very important that researchers of the history of our disciplines use the methods and the skills of the historian (Delisle 1997–98), and this observation is necessary since, in all likelihood, it will not be history scholars but rather translation and interpreting specialists who will be attracted by this field of study. In the case of interpreting, the selection of sources and, for more recent periods, the building of one's own sources through oral history techniques will be of particular importance. The fact that previous research has been carried out in a particular area should not discourage other researchers from working on the same issues. On the contrary, the use of other tools or approaches, or — simply — of a different generational perspective can make significant contributions to the knowledge of the past. It is clear, for example, that the vision of the first attempts at simultaneous interpreting by consecutive interpreters was not the same as that of subsequent generations. It is also clear that new approaches, as in the field of postcolonial studies, have shed new light on the role of linguistic and cultural mediation in terms of relationships of domination over *the other*. One of the elements that should be pointed out in historical research in our disciplines is that an understanding of history can help professionals, trainers and trainees face the natural changes experienced in all disciplines with technological evolution and can help researchers predict how new trends will evolve. For example, the reactions of current professionals to information technologies and remote interpreting can be understood in the framework of similar reactions in the past to simultaneous interpreting devices. Preservation of the oral heritage of veterans in the profession should also be an aim. A few years ago in Monterey, California, I entitled my contribution *A Past for Our Future*. Perhaps we should vindicate here a future for our past.

State of affairs

In a previous paper on this issue I reflected on the present situation with respect to conference interpreting (Baigorri-Jalón 2003). I consider that what I said there is also valid for the history of interpretation in general. That is:

1. A *handbook* on the history of interpretation does not exist, and no work, no matter how general its scope may be, can claim to encompass exhaustively all periods of history and all interpreting modalities or situations.

2. In the last two decades, efforts have been made by several researchers to produce work which contributes to filling the gaps that we have in the knowledge of our past. We refer the reader to the references in this paper. The names of researchers such as David and Margareta Bowen, Jean Delisle, Julio-César Santoyo, Ingrid Kurz or Lourdes Arencibia, among others, will always be associated with important contributions to the history of our profession. That is also the case with journals such as *Babel*, *META*, the *St. Jerome Quarterly*, *Hieronymus Complutensis*, *Livius*, *SENDEBAR*, and *Interpreting*, among others, and with initiatives such as Georges Bastin's *HISTAL*.

3. In the more general publications — only very exceptionally devoted entirely to interpreting — references to interpretation and interpreters are mixed with those of translation.

4. Some brief compilations have been produced but have not been well disseminated.

5. Most of the research, at least that known by the author of this paper, deals with experiences in the West or with Western endeavours and is framed in the historical periods or landmarks of the Western tradition.

6. Most publications are brief articles on, for example, an issue, a case, or an interpreter.

Research suggestions

In a recent publication, Jean Delisle (2003) enumerates twenty-one fields of research that have, until now, captured the attention of researchers in the history of translation (in a broad sense). Only two of them deal specifically with interpretation, but many of them might have equivalent areas of interest in interpretation. Thus I consider Delisle's paper, and also his CD-ROM on the history of translation, as excellent starting points for those who feel tempted by the study of the history of interpretation. In our paper quoted above (Baigorri-Jalón 2003), we proposed a table summarizing research proposals, presented in four columns. The first column includes possible topics for research, the second possible sources, the third methodological procedures, and the fourth difficulties the researcher might encounter. That table was by no means intended to be exhaustive, but merely indicative. Since it referred only to conference interpreting, we will present here a more complete series of proposals which may interest future researchers.

Let us point out that some of the huge job still to be done would be better served if research were carried out by teams, in constant exchange of experiences and findings with similar groups elsewhere. In this regard, once again Delisle had a pioneering idea when he conceived the *Repertoire of Historians of Translation*. Research should be carried out above all at the doctoral or postdoctoral level. A proposal we make is to promote doctoral seminars on specific topics in the history of translation and interpreting, for instance through doctoral mobility programs aimed at professors, young doctoral graduates, and Ph.D. students.

When we refer in the table below to compilations of texts, we propose the use of information technologies (IT), although printed versions should not be excluded. When we refer to documents, the word should be understood in a wide sense, including not just written records, but also photographs, sound archives, visual materials, and so forth.

TOPICS	SOURCES	METHODS	DIFFICULTIES
Compilation of basic texts on the history of interpretation	Archives, chronicles, history books, institutions, users and observers of interpretation, the media, interpreters	Search, selection and compilation of texts in electronic and other media	Need for a historical guiding thread; fragmentary and scattered nature of sources
Encyclopaedia or biographical anthology of interpreters who have played an important role in the profession	Chronicles, memoirs, personal archives, interviews with interpreters, their relatives or acquaintances, works by interpreters, the media	Search of published information, study of unpublished documents, oral history	Selection of the Who's Who, access to unpublished documents (e.g., personal archives), access to interpreters or others for interviews
Compilation of corpora	Written, graphic, oral (archives, verbatim records or minutes, the media, interpreters themselves, etc.)	Search, collection and transcription from archives, collection of images and sound, questionnaires of oral history	Scattered condition of written and graphic documents, quality and format of sound archives, availability of interpreters to be interviewed
History of interpretation in a historical period (e.g., Antiquity, Middle Ages)	Historical and diplomatic archives, chronicles, corpora, history books, museums	Selection, transcription, compilation, interpretation, use of IT for information processing	Scarcity of references to interpreters in archives, chronicles, etc.; not all corpora available in easy-to-review IT media; palaeographic skills
History of interpretation in a country or territory	Chronicles, official archives, private archives (of national associations, interpreters, for example), professional associations' bulletins, the media, interpreters themselves (memoirs, personal interviews)	Search, analytical work, oral history	Access to archives (particularly private ones), fragmentary and scattered information, access to interpreters (age, willingness)
History of interpreters at an international organization (IO)	Archives of the IO, literature on the IO, interviews with the IO staff or freelance interpreters or with others (administration, users, linguistic staff), the media	Search, analytical work, oral history	Legal constraints for access to personnel dossiers or others in the IO; access to interpreters and other potential informants
History of interpretation at an institution (e.g., a Ministry for Foreign Affairs or a multilingual parliament) or of a professional association (national or international)	Archives of the institution or association (bulletins, correspondence, etc.); references in history books and the media; interviews with interpreters and others	Search, analytical work, oral history	Legal constraints for access to archives; access to interpreters or other potential informants

History of court interpreting (in general or limited to a multilingual court)	Historical literature about the court(s), court archives and records, testimonies by interpreters, administration, users, etc.	Search, analytical work, cross-reference of data, oral history	Legal restriction for access to confidential sources; access to interpreters and other informants
Sound history of interpretation (general or specific to an institution, territory, etc.)	Sound archives from public and private institutions, radio, museums, and so forth	Search, retrieval, digitalization, classification, presentation (sound and text)	Access to materials (preservation, format, legal restrictions, copyright constraints)
Image history of interpretation (general or specific to an institution, territory, etc.); interpreters in action	Film archives, TV archives, museums, and so on; specialized literature; the media	Search, retrieval, digitalization, classification, presentation (image and text)	Access to materials (preservation, legal restrictions, copyright constraints)
Interpreters in fiction films	Film and video archives; specialized movie literature	Search of relevant scenes; translation and transcription of original soundtrack; classification; presentation (e.g., dubbed, subtitled)	Topic choice (for instance, WW2 films or westerns); variety of media (celluloid, different video systems, DVD); scattered nature of film and video archives; access and copyright restrictions
History of media interpreting	Sound and TV archives, literature on the topic	Search of illustrative examples; translation and transcription; presentation	Access constraints (preservation, legal restrictions); interpreters' and companies' copyright restrictions
Specific historical interpreting situations (e.g. Moctezuma and Cortés in Mexico)	Chronicles, archives	Selection of materials, cross-reference; reconstruction of the situation; reinterpreting sources	Scarcity of sources, palaeography, source interpretation difficulties
Technological evolution in the history of interpreting	Archives (institutions, engineering companies), museums, technicians, interpreters (and their associations), the media	Search for technological devices, classification through time, oral history	Scattered nature of technological devices through time and space, access to private companies' files, technicians and interpreters
The history of interpretation training (in general, focused on a school or group of schools)	Archives (Foreign Affairs and Education Ministries, schools), school staff, memoirs and other books, interpreters, alumni	Legislation on education, schools' statistical data compilation and processing, oral history for qualitative data	Access to archives (particularly to school files), access to staff and alumni
Interpreter characters in fiction literature	Literary works, previous research on the subject	Search, compilation, analytical work, interpretation (fiction vs. reality)	Choice of languages, countries, periods or authors
The history of sign language interpreting (general, in a country, etc.)	Books, archives (institutions and associations), interpreters and users	Search and compilation of relevant data, oral (or sign language) history techniques	Differences among sign language systems, communication with users

The place of history of translation
and interpreting in training programs

We propose that at least some notions of the history of the profession be taught in all interpreting training programs. The contents and the format may vary, according to the level of training, from a basic introduction to one or more seminars to a specific course (in Ph.D. programs, for instance). The contents should not be static but reflect the evolution of research in the field and new paradigms or approaches. They should adapt to the place and the circumstances in which the training takes place, focusing each time on relevant issues for the students. Basic texts and materials could constitute the basis for analysis, interpretation and discussion. A general overview could include reflections about the beginnings of the history of interpreting, with references to the works of Ingrid Kurz on ancient Egypt and ancient Rome. We could continue with references to the Middle Ages, perhaps with the example of Toledo, studied by Clara Foz, where the linguistic skills of Spanish Jews were used to translate a series of important works — some of Greek origin — from Arabic into vernacular Spanish and/or to Latin through oral sight-translation techniques. The interpreters of the New World between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries could be the subject of another chapter. The outlook of both sides, the conqueror and the *other*, could be studied from the perspective of the Renaissance chroniclers and that of postcolonial studies. The school of jeunes *de langues* and the figure of the dragomans could also be part of the chapter. Regarding contemporary history, we would propose a unit which should include, among other topics, the following: the beginnings of the conference interpreter profession as we know it (the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and League of Nations); the Nuremberg Trial and the coming of age of simultaneous interpreting; the United Nations (consolidation of the profession, simultaneous revolution, feminization of the profession, and the ongoing IT revolution); bilingual or multilingual interpreting in other institutions (the Canadian Parliament, the European Union); court interpreting; social services interpreting; media interpreting.

Conclusions

The *end of history* was forecast some time ago, in a triumphalist manner, by some prophets of the new era. Luckily, history adamantly fails to stop, as Fontana (1992) rightly pointed out, reacting to Fukuyama's book. And as for the history of interpreting — and to a certain extent also the history of translation — we are only beginning.

The title of this book, *Charting the Future of Translation History,* stresses that we should see the history of our profession as a past for our future, that is, with predictive value for those who will follow us, taking advantage of the lessons learned from past experience. We owe our effort to recover our past to those who contributed to our professions, to our present colleagues, to the translators and interpreters that we are training now, and also to our societies in general. The results of our research should transcend our captive audience, because what we say may be of relevance for many professionals and scholars who work in other fields of study and research.

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