

Introduction to Consecutive Interpretation : Definition, Description and History

Consecutive Interpretation may be defined as a mode of oral translation in which the interpreter speaks after the source-language speaker has finished speaking. The speech is divided into segments, and the interpreter sits or stands beside the source-language speaker, listening and taking notes as the speaker progresses through the message.

Consecutive interpreting was officially born during World War I, even though it had already existed before and was used regularly by merchants, politicians, ambassadors, etc. In fact, it was born before simultaneous interpretation, since it is more natural to wait until the speaker has finished talking in order to begin the interpretation. Thus, consecutive interpretation is done with complete or partial intervention of the speaker, which means that the interpreter has to listen to the speech, or a fragment of it, and then interpret it into the target language after the speaker has finished.

Thereupon, consecutive interpretation is a mode that requires a lot of memory effort and the ability to make logical judgments regarding the speech. In order to handle large amounts of information at a time, the interpreter advised to take notes. It is very important to be able to master note-taking, since it is the main strategy used in consecutive interpreting. For note-taking, the interpreter not only needs a notebook and a pen, but also a profound knowledge of abbreviations, symbols and other resources that allow the process to be done in a quick and efficient manner. In addition, it is also important to possess the ability to analyze the structure, cohesion, and articulation of the speech, in order to be able to take notes from the original speech, preserve and understand the same, and finally reproduce it into the target language.

This mode is principally used at conferences, in courtrooms and at press conferences, as well as other places that lack the necessary equipment needed for simultaneous interpreting. Consecutive interpretation is done in person to the target audience of the discourse. Therefore, the interpreter's physical appearance should be adequate for the context of the event. He or she must go unnoticed, choose the correct attire for each occasion, avoid

dramatic gestures, adjust his or her tone of voice and remain in the background. This way, the interpreter will avoid drawing undesirable attention to him or herself, since it is the speaker who should be the main focus of the occasion.

Ancient History

Interpretation became a profession already in the ancient world: first professional interpreters are said to be present at the court of Egyptian pharaohs, and the division between civilian and military interpreters was already there in ancient Persia.

In Korea, during the Joseon Kingdom (1392-1910) the jungin (or the “middle people”) was a highly specialized group of technical experts who helped aristocracy to run the government. There was a special Office of Interpreters. The jungin taught civil servants foreign languages and provided government interpreters for the court.

A Mayan vase depicts several people being received by a ruler. One of the shields says in classic Mayan language: CHIJLAM or “interpreter.”

Throughout history many interpreters were also translators i.e. they interpreted orally and worked as scribes who translated written texts as required by their employers.

Modern History

In Europe, Latin, French and English succeeded each other as the language of diplomacy. Educated diplomats and statesmen were usually multilingual and until the early 20th century there was no particular need for diplomatic interpreters as a separate category. There was, however, a great need to communicate with inhabitants of newly discovered lands, including the Americas. A few names of interpreters survived, for example, Doña Marina or Malintzin helped Cortés in at least three languages: Spanish, Náhuatl, and Chontal Maya.

It is almost agreed upon that interpretation as a profession witnessed an important qualitative leap at the beginning of the 20th century with the appearance of a new figure: the conference interpreter, a mode that arose from the geopolitical circumstances of that period in World War I (1914-1918). At that period, anyone who could serve as a link between

military units, unable to understand each other, were of vital importance to the war machine. They were known as war interpreters.

At the end of the war, some of them would later act as linguistic mediators at the Peace Conference that was held in Paris in 1919. At this conference, the representatives of four of the victorious countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Italy) met to discuss a series of topics that would culminate, among other things, into the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the creation of the League of Nations. The Paris Peace Conference was characterized as being the first major multilateral conference in which interpretation was systematically used in the two official languages: English and French. Thus, speakers had to express themselves in one of the two languages and an interpreter provided a version of the speech in the other official language. The most utilized mode was, of course, consecutive interpretation, but sight translation and *chuchotage* or whispered interpretation were also used.

Interpretation during the Interwar Period

When the League of Nations was formed, the co-official languages of this organization were English and French, which meant that if speakers wanted to express themselves in a third language, they had to provide their own interpreters.

It is important here to note two significant events that participated in the professionalization of interpretation. The first is the introduction of selection procedures for interpreters and the second is the achievements relative to the working conditions of freelance interpreters.

However, this mode, which worked well in an organization with only two official languages, turned out to be less advisable in the International Labor Organization (ILO), where a larger number of languages were spoken. After this, the need for the use of simultaneous interpretation rose steeply. In the late 1920s, experts began conducting analysis following the International Labor Conferences and thus began adapting the system to fit the needs that they identified. As the years went by, things improved not only on a technical level, but also in regard to interpreters' training with the creation of a special training course in 1928.

Interpretation after World War II

The profession has evolved considerably since the end of World War II. One of the most significant changes is the steady advance of simultaneous interpreting which surpassed consecutive interpreting, in spite of the reluctance of veteran interpreters, who considered simultaneous interpreting to be a threat to their status and position. Indeed, it is evident that simultaneous interpreting hinders the interpreter's view and may cause him to feel like his job is very mechanical. However, these factors were unable to counteract the many advantages that simultaneous interpreting offers.

Another important sign of progress was the progressive consolidation of interpretation as a profession, favored by the existence of more specific training courses and because of the establishment of rigorous candidate selection processes for international organizations.

Nowadays, many universities around the world offer a degree in Translation and Interpretation on both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Research in the academic institutions has flourished and gone as far as connecting consecutive interpreting with such disciplines as cognition including memory studies and psychology.