

Baigorri-Jalón, Jesús (2004). *Interpreters at the United Nations: A History*. Translated from Spanish by Anne Barr. Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, pp.181. ISBN 84-7800-643-5. 16 €.

In this book, the author analyses the history of conference interpreters at the United Nations from the creation of the UN in 1945 to the present day. However, the relevance of the analysis extends far beyond the UN, mostly because the beginnings of conference interpreting at the League of Nations (see Baigorri-Jalón 2000) and in the UN have had a deep and long-lasting influence on the image conference interpreters have of themselves, on the philosophy of AIIC, the very influential International Association of Conference Interpreters, and more generally on present-day interpreting in the West.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to multilingualism in the UN, and offers interesting explanations on choices of official languages made initially – they could have been very different, with major implications on conference interpreting. Chapter 2 examines the first generation of UN interpreters and highlights their sociological profile (typically highly educated, talented veterans of the League of Nations and other international organizations with an international background), and their image as "marvels", which resulted in diva behaviour in some. It explains the discontinuity which occurred when the move from consecutive to simultaneous interpreting occurred. It analyses and illustrates the sometimes fierce conflict between those who defended simultaneous and those who believed "there is no other method but consecutive interpretation" (p.52), perhaps for sociological reasons, as consecutive made them less visible and was associated with a risk of status loss (p.55-57). The insistence of high-level interpreter training programs on consecutive to this day has cognitive and technical reasons (in particular, consecutive strengthens analytical listening and creative speaking skills and allows instructors to diagnose specific weaknesses and to take remedial action), but the legacy of positions of principle taken during these early years may be a strong factor as well. This chapter also describes early training and admission procedures, a far cry from present institutionalized practice in conference interpreter training programs.

Chapter 3 focuses on the gradual "normalisation" of conference interpreting as a profession, with a loss of the wonderboy status and the crystallisation of a more professional environment. It describes the first conference interpreter training programs, the beginnings of serious professional conflicts around working conditions in the UN, including the 1974 "strike" which Baigorri-Jalón considers a milestone in the move from "marvel" to "profession" (p.111-115).

The fourth and last chapter analyses the "new generation", from the 1980s on. It highlights the feminisation of the profession (women

interpreters made up 21% of the staff in the UN in 1950, and 69% in 1998 - p.120, p.135), as well as the role of interpreter schools, including the Moscow and Beijing institutes, which train about 65% of the present staff (p.121). The author recalls that most instructors are AIIC members, which leads to a widespread agreement between all the schools. He highlights the fact that the background of present-day interpreters is less romantic than public image will have it: many come from ordinary monolingual families and have studied foreign languages at school and at university. Present-day working conditions are discussed, and the author stresses that the speakers' attitude and other factors sometimes make it difficult for interpreters to carry out their task efficiently. The evolution of working languages in the UN is also analysed, including the increasingly dominant role of English.

The conclusion is a summary, topped by 3 pages on "the conference interpreter of today and tomorrow", a more speculative, less convincing ending to the book.

The data are documented abundantly and systematically, in particular with UN and UN-related documents, interviews and personal correspondence. This may be one major difference between Baigorri-Jalón's books and other publications on interpreting history, a difference perhaps due to his training as a historian. The level of detail and information provided through careful research and interviews is noteworthy. For people who started interpreting in the 1970s and later, this book offers fascinating keys to claims and attitudes which would be difficult to reconcile with actual work in the field in the past one or two decades. I found the book less powerful than its predecessor (Baigorri-Jalón 2000), just published in a French version in Canada, but would say that both definitely deserve to be read by anyone with an interest in conference interpreting as a profession.

Baigorri-Jalón, Jesús. 2000. *La interpretación de conferencias. Nacimiento de una profesión. De París a Nuremberg*. Granada: Comares. ISBN 84-8444-055-9.

French version: Baigorri-Jalón, Jesús. 2004. *De Paris à Nuremberg : Naissance de l'interprétation de conférence*. Traduit de l'espagnol sous la direction de Clara Foz. Les presses de l'université d'Ottawa. ISBN 2-7603-0576-7.

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