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**Paneth, Eva, An Investigation into Conference Interpreting  
(With Special Reference to the Training of Interpreters). Thesis  
for the Degree of M.A. in Education, London University, April  
1957. 160 p.**

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## LES OUTILS DU TRADUCTEUR

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Interpretation has existed in one form or another since the dawn of civilization. The documented use of it goes back at least to the third millennium B.C. when, according to Miss Eva Paneth in her recent thesis entitled *An Investigation into Conference Interpreting*, "the rulers of the southern provinces had the title 'prefect of the dragomans',<sup>(1)</sup> or experts in foreign tongues." (Cf. supra 3).

The grave of Haremhab at Memphis depicts in relief the gestures and attitudes of an interpreter transmitting the message of the Egyptian ruler to a humbled people. Today, the word "interpreting" is more apt to evoke a mental picture of the United Nations General Assembly with its earphone-equipped delegates and, perhaps more vaguely, the glass windows of the interpreters' booths on the sidelines. It is the modern techniques of conference interpreting that Miss Paneth has sought to investigate in the thesis she recently presented for the degree of Master of Arts in Education at the University of London. Her study of consecutive and simultaneous interpretation is based on her own work as an interpreter, as well as upon her observation of the work of other interpreters in conferences held both in England and abroad. She has studied rather closely existing techniques both from the point of view of efficiency and style, as well as from that of the interpreter. Hers is therefore a study, not only of interpretation, but of the interpreter as well.

Miss Paneth would doubtless have found it interesting to study interpreting techniques in an English-speaking country. This was not possible, however, since there exists no such school in England. She did, however, study interpreting at the Ecole d'Interprètes of the University of Geneva, as well as the Ecole d'Interprètes forming a part of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales in Paris. Miss Paneth has spent at least half of her life in German-speaking countries, and has taught both German and French. The thesis which she has published bears witness to her flawless command of English. Several years ago, she joined an interpreting group, more or less as a hobby. The group formed part of the Linguists' Club of London, and Miss Paneth points out that at the present time, it is only through the work of such clubs that interpreting techniques may be transmitted in England.

Through her work with the Linguists' Club, she trained herself as a simultaneous interpreter, soon taking her place in the interpreter's booth of international conferences. It is this field which offers the greatest scope for the talents of today's simultaneous interpreter.

Simultaneous interpreting as a technique was first patented in 1926 by Gordon Finlay. He was, however, unsuccessful at bringing his new technique to the attention of congresses until 1946, when it was first used at the Congrès de la Route in Schevenigen, and at the famous Nuremberg trials. It was not

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<sup>1</sup> Assyrian : targumen; Arabic : targuman; Egyptian Arabic : dragoman; Middle High German : drutzelman; French : truchemen(t).

until 1947 that simultaneous interpreting first gained wide-spread acceptance, first at the Conseil National Helvétique, and then at the University of Geneva, where a course was established under Professor Velleman in 1948. Today, whenever simultaneous interpretation is mentioned, one thinks instinctively of the United Nations and its General Assembly.

In recent years, international problems have been solved to a great extent by delegates of different countries meeting together. Since the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the participation in such conferences by English-speaking delegates has raised English to a rôle of importance as an international language. Previously, French alone enjoyed this distinction. Today, the language of any first-class power may claim the same prerogative. A recent democratization of international diplomacy has led to a participation in conferences by amateur diplomats and technical experts not necessarily versed in any language other than their own. The services of the professional interpreter therefore become vital.

Many experts feel that the best interpreters translate into their mother tongue only. Miss Paneth suggests that the trained interpreter should possess two main languages that he can translate into or out of with equal facility. In addition, she feels he should know two other languages well enough to translate them into one of his main languages, although he may not be able to translate in the opposite direction. Finally, while English and French are not the only diplomatic languages, their importance as a second language, as well as that of the countries whose mother tongue they are, impose upon the translator the obligation of speaking them socially, at least.

A great many interesting studies of the techniques of simultaneous interpreting are presented by Miss Paneth. For example, she brings out the fact that the term "simultaneous" is in reality a misnomer. The simultaneous interpreter does not interpret what he hears, but rather what he has just heard, and she has established that there is a mean time lag of from two to four seconds, representing fifteen to twenty-one words. No translator interprets word for word at the same time as the speaker. The manner in which each interpreter uses this time lag has furnished a number of interesting subjects for research. Miss Paneth points out that any public speaker divides his speech into word-groups, each representing a thought; it is these thoughts that the translator seizes and translates en bloc. Furthermore, the speaker isolates these word groups by pauses, and it has been established by Miss Paneth that the word-groups last, on the average, for 3.3 seconds, while the pauses that separate them are, on the average, 1.3 seconds long. The manner in which the interpreter plays with these word groups, as well as the pauses that set them off, is most instructive. If the word-group is short, the interpreter usually fits the translation into the subsequent pause, speeding it up if necessary. On the other hand, if the group is long, and the thought complicated, he will make an early start, frequently speeding it up in order to finish at the same time as the speaker. He may even anticipate and finish before the speaker does. This practice is an extremely dangerous one, not, strangely enough, because of the possibility of a mistake, but rather because the listener feels he is being cheated if he hears the speaker continuing after the translator has stopped. The average interpreter will not anticipate unless experience has led him to foresee the outcome of some characteristic cliché or expression. He does not indulge in wild guessing. Nevertheless, translating out of German sometimes tempts the interpreter into hasarding a guess concerning a verb which will not be heard until the end of a clause. If he guesses wrong, the time gained will have to be used to correct himself.

The treatment of pauses in the interpretation is likewise important. Interpreters tend to make pauses far shorter than those of the speaker, while talking 25% faster than the speaker. If the interpreter has an extremely rapid rate of delivery, coupled with a tendency to anticipate, he may finish before the speaker and use the time in hand to elucidate. The interpreters who are the most admired, however, are those who begin long after the speaker, and who have more of the thought available before attempting to translate it. It is in fact Miss Paneth's contention that interpretation of any sort requires that the

interpreter seize the over-all thought before starting to translate. Strict adherence to this principle alone will protect the simultaneous interpreter from unfortunate comparisons between his work and that of a parrot. The experienced interpreter will at all times be more conscious of his output than he is of his audition.

While every interpreter works differently, they generally fall into three categories. Some keep close behind the speaker and seize on every word. Others do not interpret, but rather deliver a lecture in another language on what they have just heard. Others concentrate completely on the output, surrendering themselves to the voice of the speaker, and turning out a translation which may in itself be a work of art. The first of these procedures is open to a charge of mediocrity. It is best applied to technical or legal matters where precision outweighs style. According to Miss Paneth, some interpreters so abandon themselves to the Voice that they can write letters while interpreting. In cases where only one interpreter understands the language of the speaker, his interpretation is sometimes relayed to other booths for retranslation into other languages. This practice is condemned as unprofessional. Anyone who has retraced a piece of gossip to its source will understand why.

Simultaneous interpreting is by no means the only technique employed at conferences. For many years, consecutive interpreting was used, and it is only recently that it has been supplanted, at least in part, by simultaneous interpretation. Consecutive interpretation is a somewhat different technique. The interpreter listens to the speech and takes notes on it, after which he stands up and delivers in another language a summary of the speech which is about 2/3 as long as the speech itself. There is a reason for this. If the translation is as long as the speech, for psychological reasons, it appears longer to the listener.

The main disadvantage to consecutive translation is the time wasted during which the different translations are read aloud. On the other hand, the advantage is that the time devoted to the interpretation may be used by delegates who do not need the interpretation to confer with one another, to marshal their thoughts, and to draw up plans for subsequent speeches. Another advantage is that the finished product can be a work of art. This is less frequently the case with simultaneous interpretation. Sometimes everyone understands the original, and the interpretation thus becomes superfluous. Simultaneous interpreting is open to the same criticism, of course. Sometimes the original is not worth listening to in the first place. If this is the case, the interpreter's job becomes difficult, since he is deprived of an active and interested audience and may himself have been unable to concentrate on the speaker's platitudes.

As far as the techniques of consecutive interpreting are concerned, Miss Paneth points out that by far the majority of interpreters take notes in the language into which they are interpreting. The use of shorthand is forbidden, since it is not practical to take down in shorthand a verbatim report of a speech, and then to translate, edit and deliver it, all the while standing on one's feet before an audience. In fact, it would be more exact to say that the notes are taken in a series of symbols that are the personal property of the individual interpreter, which are designed to avoid ambiguity, cover all situations, and recall to the interpreter the thoughts expressed by the speaker, which he will himself express in another language. It is for this reason that it becomes important for the translator to admit he has not understood the speaker's remarks, whenever such is the case. Sometimes nobody has.

Insofar as general points concerning interpreting are concerned, Miss Paneth points out that simultaneous interpreting service is now available in many European countries as a part of the telephone system. Jokes, quotations, proverbs and poetry constitute a disastrous and sudden pitfall for the simultaneous interpreter, due to the lack of time at his disposal for thinking up a suitable equivalent. She likewise speaks of the contempt in which simultaneous interpreting is held by many a consecutive interpreter, who considers his own profession as an art, while that of the simultaneous interpreter is likened to the unthinking repetition of a parrot. It might be pointed out in recompense to the simultaneous interpreter that the average layman feels anybody who knows two languages can do consecutive interpreting, while he has a universal tendency to stand in

awe of the simultaneous interpreter. In reality, each technique is a distinct one fulfilling a separate function, and responding to different needs. Given the proper circumstances, either one can be bungled.

Whatever the interpreting technique employed, Miss Paneth puts the interpreter on guard against certain dangers. People speaking their second languages often express themselves poorly, or worse yet, express beautifully something they had no intention of saying. If a delegate whose mother tongue is French thinks, "Comment peut-on prétendre . . .", and says in English, "How can you pretend . . .", the translator must have the over-all thought well in mind, or he will fall into the trap. Most mistakes in simultaneous work arise from the habit of blindly interpreting a series of words when the over-all thought has not been grasped. Differences between the means of expression employed by people speaking different dialects of the same language sometimes cause trouble as well. Asked the question, "Who wrote **Treasure Island**?" the average Englishman may well reply, "Wasn't it Stevenson?" while his American cousin would say, "Stevenson did." Neither one is less sure than the other of his data.

Miss Paneth is quite definite in treating machine translation as a possibility for the future. She cites experiments in this field currently being carried out at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Georgetown University and Birkbeck College in London. The International Business Machines Corporation is keenly interested in this line of experimentation. They are the ones who are making the machines. Miss Paneth points out that the position of professionals in regard to the development of machine translation is much like that adopted in the face of simultaneous interpreting development. The interpreters were hostile to Finlay's invention, conference organizers needed much persuading, while I.B.M. pushed the new technique, in order to sell machines. The author of this study points out that, like most automation techniques, machine translation is more likely to furnish work for translators than to take it away. But like most interpreters, Miss Paneth is hostile to the machine. "Translation", she declares, "is fun, and I had rather send a machine out to play tennis for me than to have one do my interpreting."

As Miss Paneth stresses at the beginning of her study, her thesis poses more questions than it answers, and the reader has the sensation of being poised on the brink of a vast, unexplored sea. "The success of simultaneous interpretation proves that thought is non-linguistic," she says. The non-language employed by many consecutive interpreters would tend to indicate the same thing. It is further established that the simultaneous interpreter can concentrate on what he says, allowing his audition to pursue its automatic course, relatively unheeded. But can the interpreter concentrate on translating what comes in one ear, while ignoring different material being fed to the other? This would furnish material for an interesting series of experiments, as would a study of what the consecutive interpreter tends to forget. So far, most studies have centered around what the interpreter remembers.

Miss Paneth's study does not include a discussion of the rôle of interpreters' organizations, as "their meetings are largely concerned with the discussion of fees, while discussions of a professional code are difficult to get on the agenda." She does, however, commiserate with the individual interpreter, who must shoulder the blame whenever misunderstandings arise between delegates. Such differences are, alas, too easily explained away as the result of a poor translation. Unjust? Perhaps; but as Miss Paneth points out, being a scapegoat is but one of the duties the interpreter must assume in the interests of better international understanding.

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