

100 Years of Conference Interpreting

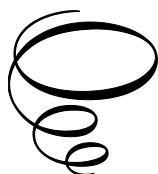
100 Years of Conference Interpreting:

A Legacy

Edited by

Kilian G. Seeber

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To Ashley, Josephine and Amelie,
for they help me interpret the world around me.

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TIME TO TAKE STOCK: 100 YEARS OF CONFERENCE INTERPRETING

KILIAN G. SEEBER

Outside the realm of international meetings, conference interpreting remains a profession shrouded in mystery. Conference interpreters, bound to strict professional secrecy by their code of ethics, are usually invisible and rarely make the news – even less often perhaps than their counterparts working in the field, in courtrooms or in hospitals.

On the occasion of 100 years of conference interpreting, therefore, this volume pays tribute to a profession that is deeply intertwined with – and often considered a catalyst of – the world of multilateral diplomacy. It does not aspire to provide an exhaustive account of an entire century of interpreting history. Instead, it was conceived as a collection of scholarly articles and opinion pieces illustrating what different stakeholders make of this profession one hundred years on: how they see its past, its present and its future.

The contributions to this volume were collected at a two-day event held in Autumn 2019 that was co-organized by the University of Geneva and the International Labour Organization with the support of the International Association of Conference Interpreters. Beyond a star-studded line-up of speakers and a highly diverse list of attendees, this event also boasted an unconventional format geared towards participant interaction, with the bulk of the meeting dedicated to discussions and exchanges in the guise of interactive panel discussions and a town hall.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, this volume's format is similarly unconventional, with the official opening and closing addresses to the conference providing a frame for a series of scholarly articles along with a set of questions addressed, in any of the event's three working languages (English, French and Spanish), by different stakeholders in opinion pieces and direct replies.

Our 100-year journey begins at the ILO, whose Director General, Guy Ryder, reminds us of how, from its inception in 1919, conference interpreting has allowed this international organisation to fulfil its mission, by allowing discussions between different stakeholders to be held on an equal footing regardless of their foreign language skills. In Ryder's words, "...when the interpretation stops, the discussion stops". The Director-General reminds us that, while Paris was the birthplace of conference interpreting, Geneva, and more specifically, the ILO, was the birthplace of simultaneous conference interpreting. Close cooperation with the professional association (AIIC) on one hand and universities on the other, argues Ryder, will ensure that the professionals in the booths can act as a "comfort blanket" for delegates who know that "however incoherent or illogical they may be speaking in their own language, somebody in the booth is going to make a bit more sense of it somehow".

What the beginning of this journey looked like at the ILO is visually documented in Jesús Baigorri-Jalón's lead article, in which the 'chronicler of the profession' takes a closer look at the birth of simultaneous interpreting. Using photographic evidence from the Organization's historical archives, he vividly describes how this new, or at least repurposed technology came about, how it was implemented, and how the first interpreters having to use it were selected and trained. Baigorri-Jalón makes the point that, although the first-ever simultaneous interpreting course was organized by the ILO in early 1928, "the real interpreting system was not the electrical setting but the interpreters' brains and vocal cords". This point is probably not lost on a profession profoundly affected by the technological changes brought about by the pandemic that engulfed the world only a few months after the centenary celebrations.

Against the political-historical backdrop sketched in the lead article, in the first two chapters a total of eight scholarly papers address a selection of topical issues relating to the practice of conference interpreting as well as the training of conference interpreters.

Franz Pöchhacker and Monika Stögerer look back over a half a century of research on anticipation in conference interpreting – in other words, the interpreter's seemingly magical ability to predict what speakers are about to say. Replicating methodology approaches already used some 25 years earlier, they revisit the hypothesis that anticipation might be linked to interpreting directionality in a small-scale experiment on interpreting students, finding corroborating evidence for an "into B" advantage that might, however, be mitigated by a proficiency disadvantage.

Maya de Wit, Onno Crasborn and Jemina Napier take look at interpreters' need to predict what speakers will say from a slightly broader perspective and compare how sign language conference interpreters' preparation strategies are affected by the type of sign language they work with (i.e., national sign language or international sign). Their qualitative analysis of a naturalistic event substantiates the idea that interpreters use the same materials to prepare for conferences regardless of sign-language typology. These materials, however, seem to be used rather differently, suggesting that *how* rather than *what* interpreters prepare is indeed conditioned by target language and by extension, target audience.

Andrei Kalinin and Maria Mikhailovskaia look beyond the traditional multilingual conference rooms of international organisations and analyse the impact of different settings on the simultaneous interpretation of political press conferences. A comparison of corpora of simultaneous interpretations provided (in situ) at diplomatic settings with those provided (remotely) at media settings suggests that setting type might indeed condition interpreters' preference for form-based vs. meaning-based approaches.

In the last contribution to this chapter, Carlo Eugeni and Rocío Bernabé address the somewhat provocative question of whether the future of simultaneous interpreting might be written. To do so, the authors provide a contrastive process analysis of simultaneous interpreting and real-time subtitling. In their discussion, they touch upon sociolinguistic and psychocognitive elements of both tasks before providing a comparative skill analysis, coming to the conclusion that respeaking might not only be cognitively comparable to interpreting, but also allow interpreters to broaden their skillset and increase the added value of their service.

Skills are also at the centre of Lucía Ruiz Rosendo and Marie Diur's contribution, which opens the chapter on conference interpreter training with an analysis of the skills conference interpreters need in today's (institutional) professional environment. Their overview of skill acquisition, the development of expertise and current approaches to conference interpreter training leads them to a critical discussion of the employability of conference interpreters in international organisations, in which they especially highlight the ever-increasing speed at which speeches are read and the importance of adjusting interpreter training accordingly.

Carmen Delgado Luchner and Nathalie Loiseau take us through the ABCs of conference interpreters' language combinations in their in-depth discussion of language performance descriptors. In doing so, they go far

beyond the now somewhat worn-out question of whether interpreters should work primarily into or from their dominant language. Instead, they provide a qualitative and quantitative analysis of a corpus of formative feedback on trainees' performances to identify different parameters of language competence.

Another novel question is raised by Alicja Okoniewska, who explores and analyses the merits of adding critical discourse analysis to the training of conference interpreters as a means to hone budding interpreters' analytical skills and their understanding of political discourse. She presents the results of a pilot study carried out in a naturalistic classroom environment using focus groups to better understand how students implement the theoretical concepts presented and practiced in a series of seminars and concludes by highlighting the potential of this training approach.

The discussion of novel training approaches continues in Joshua Goldsmith and Michelle Hof's contribution, the last one in this chapter, in which they present a survey-based comparative analysis of the perception of tutor-student and peer-to-peer interaction in different online conference interpreter training courses. Contrasting training programs for different target groups, including MA students and trained professionals, they discuss the hallmarks of four different interaction scenarios with a view to ascertaining different training programmes' scalability potential.

The introduction to chapter three, the interactive part of this volume, which collects opinion pieces and replies around a set of six questions about the present and the future of conference interpreting, was penned by the co-founder and honorary president of the International Association of Conference Interpreters, Christopher Thiéry. The contributor who has witnessed the largest part of the profession's centenary introduces the discussion by providing examples of how the profession has changed, but at the same time reminding us that change is not pre-determined but can be influenced and guided.

In her reaction to the first question: "*Who are these conference interpreters and who manages them?*", Marie Muttillainen addresses the critical importance of preparation (in French), while Ian Newton discusses the strengths and weaknesses of different language service manager profiles. Replies by Marc Orlando and Raluca Droahna.

The second question: "*Who listens to conference interpreters anyway?*", comprises opinion pieces by Javier Hernández Saseta on the importance of assessing and addressing user needs and expectations (in Spanish) as well

as a call for more and better public relation work by Jonathan Downie. Replies by Evelyn Moggio-Ortiz and Maha El-Metwally.

Under the heading: “*How should we train conference interpreters?*”, I share my views on what it takes to train conference interpreters who can readily be deployed, while Monica Varela Garcia asks the not merely rhetorical question whether in-house training might be the answer. Replies from Helen J. L. Campbell and Gillian Misener.

The fourth question: “*What role will research play in conference interpreting?*”, elicited response from Bart Defrancq, who discusses what research can and cannot deliver and how, and Ebru Diriker, who highlights the potential of ethnographic studies to answer open questions. Replies by Daniel Gile and Karin Sibul.

“*What is and will be the impact of remote conference interpreting?*” became extraordinarily topical only a few months after the event took place. Here, Matthew Ball warns of the potential risk of alienation and Uroš Peterc wonders to what extent the profession is faced with revolution or merely evolution. Replies by Rawdha Cammoun-Claveria and Sophie Hengl (both in French).

The final and most far-reaching question: “*What is the future of multilingualism?*”, is addressed by Florika Fink-Hooijer, who talks about the need to shape the future as a global community, and by Agnieszka Walter-Drop, who glimpses the future to outline the conference of the future. Replies by Kim Ludvigsen and Robin Setton.

The epilogue by the Deputy Director-General of the ILO and my concluding thoughts complete the volume. Greg Vines almost prophetically submits that conference interpreting will continue to evolve and face challenges, reminding us to “always see the people at the centre of this profession”, while in my own remarks I briefly recall the backdrop against which many of the contributions were written and consequently, the historic testimony they represent.

PROLOGUE

GUY RYDER

Let me say that I have attended many meetings in this room. Practically all of them have operated because of the conference interpretation services which have been available to them. But this is, to my knowledge at least, the first meeting here dedicated precisely to the issue of conference interpretation. And you might think it's about time that we turned our attention to you!

It is a particular pleasure to welcome you all to the International Labour Organization in the ILO's centenary year. And we are absolutely delighted to co-host this conference with the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Geneva. Let me say, it seems, to me, very appropriate that we are meeting here at the ILO, because we share common origins. The ILO, as we know, was born out of the Treaty of Versailles, the Conference of Versailles of 1919. It gave birth to our organisation, but it also gave birth to the profession of multilingual, multilateral diplomacy, and hence of conference interpretation – because as I'm sure the historians amongst us are aware, and as we will hear later on, no doubt, at that point, English was attributed the same authority in international affairs as French had had until then.

Of course, things have got somewhat more complicated, but these are the origins. As I say, with the Versailles peace process came the birth of a new profession, your profession. The profession of Conference Interpreter. I've often thought that Queen Victoria said it was the place of children to be seen and not heard. You're sort of in the opposite situation, you are often heard, but not so frequently seen. So, it's great to *see* you all on this occasion. I'm tempted to say, although it's not really true for those of us who know you and your profession, that interpretation services are sometimes taken for granted. You tend to get noticed, the interpretation function tends to get noticed, when something goes wrong, which it doesn't do frequently, I must say. But we all know that when the interpretation stops, the discussion stops. When the interpretation is not there, the progress grinds to a halt. If interpretation is not of the quality that we need, and that's never the case at

the ILO, but I know from other places, the work suffers. And when interpretation is at the levels of excellence and reliability that we get here, then our organisation benefits in consequence.

In addition to the coincidence of our centenaries, I think it's worth reflecting on the fact that the histories of the ILO and of conference interpretation have remained closely intertwined ever since. Some may not be aware that the International Labour Organization was the very first user of simultaneous interpretation, and in fact it's here that the means of making it happen was invented. Ours is a tripartite house: some of you are sitting in the government seats, some of you are the employers, and some of you are the workers. You may not know it and you may wish to change seat as a consequence! So, ours is a tripartite house, but what does that mean? It means that many of the people who come to the ILO are not the diplomats, not the government representatives who may have more language skills than a trade unionist or an employer might have. And it was in 1925, I understand, that one of the employer representatives, Mr Edward Albert Filene, considered that the consecutive interpretation of all of the statements made into two languages was simply too time-consuming, and he looked for an alternative. I actually have some evidence from what I believe was the second International Labour Conference that took place in 1920 in Genoa. It was a Maritime Labour Conference and absolute chaos reigned in the meeting for a number of reasons: it was a hot day, it was a hot conversation, and nobody could hear the interpretation. And so, we needed to look for better ways to get the job done.

Together with a British officer, Alan Gordon Finlay, who was an engineer by profession of origin, and at the time a translator at the ILO, Filene repurposed existing telephone equipment to develop a system which allowed conference participants to listen to the interpretation as the speech unfolded – in real time, I guess, as we would say today. And this they called telephonic interpretation. The system was then further developed by IBM, whose director at that time was a friend of Edward Filene. Then, in 1927, with the green light of the very first Director-General of the ILO, Albert Thomas, the system was used during our annual International Labour Conference. For the first time, all participants had the opportunity to receive and hopefully to understand the message that was being given, simultaneously with its delivery, and this was particularly important for the ILO, owing to its tripartite nature. Thus was born simultaneous interpretation. It later, of course, came to be used by other bodies, and well-known, I would say notorious, because we see it so frequently in the newsreel from the Nuremberg Trials, and I understand that an exhibition of

interpretation at Nuremberg is currently open to the public at the University of Geneva.

Now, it's important for all of us, of course, to remember that your profession is work. The ILO, in addition to the coincidence of our origins, has a particular responsibility to all professions to ensure that work is undertaken in decent conditions, and that your terms and conditions are decided by appropriate industrial relations processes. And that is why we value very highly our relationship with AIIC. I think it's not surprising and it's certainly entirely appropriate that the ILO has subscribed to the agreement of the *Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence* and the UN Common System from the very start. This agreement is a unique example of negotiation in the United Nations system as a whole, of a collective agreement regulating the conditions of self-employed professionals. Let me take this opportunity to reiterate that the ILO is wholly committed to respecting that agreement and to continuing our very positive relationship with AIIC in the future. This is simply a matter of coherence with the ILO's own mandate and agenda, but it is also because ensuring decent working conditions and fair practices is a precondition and a guarantee of the quality of the services that we receive from you. I would add that the ILO is the largest United Nations single-agency employer for freelance interpreters within the system. In 2018 alone, more than 8,000 interpreter days ensured the provision of high-class services in all languages that we cover, and during our annual conferences, and we're still recovering from the rigours of our centenary conference in June. More than 6,000 delegates from all over the world communicate and work together thanks to the work that you do.

It's not surprising, given all of the circumstances that I have briefly outlined, that Geneva is a very busy hub for interpreters: in a country of peace, Geneva has been a place for dialogue. It has been all along, and the ILO as a house of dialogue has found a natural home here, and has been pleased to work closely with the University of Geneva for the training of future generations of conference interpreters. In 2017, our cooperation was formalised with a Memorandum of Understanding, and thanks to it, aspiring interpreters at the University of Geneva learn about the nature of multilingual, multilateral diplomacy in the only tripartite organisation of the UN system.

In this, our centenary year, the ILO has taken a look back at its history of 100 years. We're proud of that history, it's a rich history, but we're also looking forward, as I'm sure you are, to the future of work, which raises so

many questions in our societies and amongst our populations. And of course, we will be reflecting on the future as I'm sure you will be reflecting today and tomorrow, on the future of the interpretation profession. I think the most frequently asked question, the issue which is most quickly addressed when it comes to the future of work is the impact of technology, and I suspect that will be in your minds. We've seen it from the wonderful exhibition that's set up outside this room: I think we can all see how interpretation has benefited – and I would underline the word *benefited* – from the application of technologies over the last hundred years. It's been an extraordinary story of advancement, and I think we can see how technology has contributed to improving the work experience of interpreters and improving the quality of the services delivered. Of course, we're looking at some new issues now. To what extent can technology in the future be applied not just to facilitate established processes, but to change them? That is to say the application, the possible application, of machine services in the act of interpretation. I remain, but you know much more than I do, somewhat sceptical about the impact that this will have. It seems to me (and I've been a consumer of your services for three-and-a-half decades, and the word interpretation gives us some strong hints as to how I see this), you interpret, so the work that you do and the services that you provide are not, perhaps, so easily susceptible to automation in the way that some suggest. Also, I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that something will be lost in terms of the nuance, the meaning, the inflections that we give to our interventions in halls such as this. But we have to, of course, look to what change the future will bring. And we have to ensure that the future of work and the future of interpretation is what we wish it to be, not what some might think can be imposed through interpretation.

Let me close with just a couple of comments, if you'll allow me, of my personal experience over more than thirty years. I first came to this organisation as a rigorously monolingual member of a worker delegation in 1982. And for the first time I came into contact with the experience of simultaneous conference interpretation, and I don't mind admitting I was in awe. This was, to me, magic. How could you put this thing in your ear and listen to the interventions being made in so many different languages? Who were these people in the boxes? What sort of exotica did the booths contain? And over the years, frankly, I've never lost that sense of awe at what I still continue to refer to as the magic of interpretation services. And I want to express my admiration and my gratitude for the services that you have and continue to provide. I'm also conscious of the experience of using your services. I still retain the memories of the great anecdotes of a microphone inadvertently left open in a booth and the entertainment and embarrassment

that can sometimes ensue. The fact, and it's a reality, that delegates have that sort of comfort blanket of knowing that however incoherently or illogically they may be speaking in their own language, somebody in the booth is going to make a bit more sense of it somehow – very important added value to us all. Those rather panicked looks from the booths, those urgent requests: “Could you please tell the delegate to slow down a bit?” And we all tend to ignore you and say, “he’s doing okay, don’t worry about it.” But we have to work with these things. And all of this, I think, adds up to the human experience of interpretation. This is important. I cringe, I always cringe, at the moment, and it happens far too frequently, when the delegate who’s been caught out in an incoherence, an illogicality, a piece of nonsense, says “yeah, you know, something went wrong in the interpretation.” And I cringe on your behalf when this is said. So, I thank you also for your tolerance in the face of this mistreatment from those that you serve.

Finally, I want to say a word of thanks to those who provide the interpretation services or organise the interpretation services in this house. It is a miracle, is it not, and our ILO conference in June proved it, that our interpretation services get the right people to the right meeting in the right room at the right time, without fail. So, I want to end my contribution by expressing my sincere appreciation to our Chief Interpreter, Monica. I hope you all have a great conference; I want to stay and listen and learn from you, and I look forward to consuming your services in the years ahead. Thank you for being here.

ONCE UPON A TIME AT THE ILO: THE INFANCY OF SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING

JESÚS BAIGORRI-JALÓN

Introduction

The trouble is that, until very recently, most of the renowned interpreters were accidents of nature, the children of freak circumstance, the mutants of international evolution: no one had ever given them any formal training for a form of work which somehow just happened. (Nilski 1967, 47)

The current Director General of the International Labour Organization (ILO) recently referred to the “growing scholarly interest in the multilateral system, global governance, and international organisations” and to the idea that many narratives are possible – “there is no one single story of the ILO” (Ryder 2019, viii). My interest in the history of interpreting at that organisation goes back to over twenty years ago, when I began to look into the origins of conference interpreters at the League of Nations (LON) and the ILO (Baigorri-Jalón 1998, 2005, 2006, 2014/2000), just one of those potential narrative threads or stories.

In this paper I will approach the early days of interpreting and interpreters at the ILO, based mostly on unpublished sources and particularly on some photographs recently provided by the ILO Historical Archives, related to the early experiments in simultaneous interpreting (SI) during the second half of the 1920s and the 1930s. The bilingual regime established with English and French as official languages, both at the LON and the ILO, meant that translation and interpreting had to be provided only from and into each of the two languages. The consecutive interpreting of speeches delivered at the conferences or other subsidiary meetings (almost) doubled the duration of the sessions, thus increasing expenses. The ILO is a tripartite organisation where representatives of governments, workers and employers meet to discuss labour issues with a view to regulating the working environment. From the beginning, multilingualism was a major issue at the

ILO, particularly concerning workers' representatives, who were not necessarily conversant in either of the official languages. Edward Filene, an American entrepreneur who used to attend international conferences in the 1920s, directly felt the "friction" caused by the consecutive interpreting system, and the need to provide the regular audience of the ILO conferences with translations into several languages, not just the official ones. Filene's proposal to sponsor tests with a simultaneous interpreting apparatus is a topic I have developed at length (Baigorri-Jalón 2014/2000,133 *et seq.*), so on this occasion I will focus on a few archival photographs and on potential captions that I have assembled in order to highlight certain aspects of the experiment.

The ILO experiment in simultaneous interpreting: an illustrated story

Recent research into the history of interpreting has paid attention to the use of still images, including photographs, as historical sources (Alonso and Baigorri 2005, Fernández-Ocampo and Wolf 2014, Chernov 2016, Baigorri-Jalón 2016a). Having used photographs as primary sources to study the early practice of SI at the United Nations (UN) around 1947 (Baigorri-Jalón 2016b), I intend to apply a similar approach to some ILO photographic records of the early SI experiments. The basic theoretical and methodological background can be summarised in the following points applicable to photographs: 1) they can be used as primary historical sources and as valid historical records, whose interpretation, however, cannot be univocal; 2) they do not usually contain enough information to rebuild the whole story, so they require contextual material that is not always available in captions or other metadata; and 3) they have forensic value, provided that when we analyse the sources, already a complex exercise, we combine what we see (denotation) with what we infer from them as viewers (connotations) (Baigorri-Jalón 2016b, 167-169).

The photographs I recently obtained from the ILO Historical Archives, whose kind cooperation I wish to acknowledge, are digital versions of, I assume, the paper copies kept in their holdings, themselves duplicates of the original negatives. That institutional archive plays here two of its many roles: as a repository of the Organization's own history – in this case, analogue photographs, which someone related to the SI experiment commissioned for the record – and as a vehicle of the dissemination of part of its materials for potential exhibits or research. In the absence of the sensory perceptions of the faded colours or light (the feel, the smell, and

even the sound of those paper photographs), since they were printed nearly a hundred years ago, I am unable to experience the “aura” that surrounds these – and any other – sources. In any case, it would be difficult to describe this atmosphere in writing even if I had *felt* the paper photographs. This is a candid recognition of what is lost in the several mediation processes entailed in the analysis of historical sources, including those which are the result of the mechanical reproduction of images, echoing Walter Benjamin’s reference to photography (1969/1936). If I talk of mediation processes it is because photographs themselves are a device for mediating between reality and the viewers, one whose materiality is attained through physical and chemical methods, and whose interpretation varies according to the viewers’ circumstances, including the time and place of their observation.

From a historical perspective, the photographs in this paper are *indelible records* and *mirrors with a memory* (Scharf 1976); they have survived almost a century, thanks to the curatorial role of the ILO Historical Archives, which have thus contributed to establishing the “truth of social remembrance” or the “remembrance of events worthy of presentation” (Bate 2010, 247-248, quoting Bourdieu). These photographs are a small part of the ILO’s official photographic heritage. We should perhaps realise that “multiple photographic collections within the same institution” are a reflection of “the paradoxical promises and premises of photography itself” that lead to the “multiplicity of layers and roles” represented or played by photographs (Haberstich 2000, 47). For my research purposes, they preserve the succession of moments through which they were taken, developed and kept, thus possessing a certain longitudinal representation – or layers. At the same time, they hold a figurative value which shows – to the extent possible, because photographs, like any other record, are never neutral – the existence, at the time when the photos were taken, of human characters, devices or *roomscales* long gone. I see them as raw images or physical evidence, frozen in time, of a historical event, in this case the pioneering experimentation and early use of SI at the ILO – and in the world, as far as we can tell. They are dormant fragmentary sources, footprints of a bygone past, meaningless antiques to a majority of viewers who are unaware of what went on nearly a century ago in Geneva. If these photographs exist it is because they were commissioned by the Organization in order to document the SI experiments, as a way to show – in both a historical recording effort and a publicity exercise – the ground-breaking nature of the new system being tested, intended to improve the efficiency of the deliberations.

It is well known that photographic images were a common means of communicating “reality” in the 1920s and 1930s. Unfortunately, I am not

aware of the history of these particular photographs as objects, that is, how they were produced and used, whether or not they were shown and made available to a wide public, or the impact they had on the individual, collective or official memory of the Organization. The scant metadata provided by the ILO Historical Archives provide little information on the photographed subjects or objects. In fact, the lack of comprehensive captions deprives viewers of valuable data on the images, a silence that I wish to interpret here as a symbolic muzzle or a metaphorical “hush-a-phone”, that noise inhibiting device visible in some of the pictures in this paper.

A 1935 ILO file (O 304/5, 1935. *Telephonic Interpretation. Creation of an exhibition model*) contains the plan to present an exhibit of the telephonic interpretation system used at the International Labour Conferences. The idea behind the exhibit was to publicise how the system worked and how it facilitated communication in several languages at a time. Besides the model apparatus, which would allow spectators to see the device and how it functioned by offering recordings of original and interpreted speeches, the plan called for the presentation of a series of 13 photographs, with images of the interpreters, the equipment, the delegates, etc. The file does not include a list of the specific images, so it is not possible to tell whether the series I received from the ILO Historical Archives are directly related to the proposed exhibit. However, it seems plausible that some of those images’ content fits into the goals pursued by the exhibition, though I cannot ascertain whether it ever materialised. The interrelation between the records from 1935 that I have found and the recently “found footage” gives us a sense of what the SI ecosystem was like while it was being conceived, *ex novo*, in the 1920s and 1930s. This paper would thus ideally add new fragments to the microhistory of early experiments in SI, as an episode of a lengthier history and as a part of History with a capital H, since the SI mode brought about democratisation in multilingual international gatherings, a parallel phenomenon to the one being implemented almost at the same time in another setting, the Comintern conferences in Moscow (Chernov 2016).

The general comments made in that 1935 ILO file are worth quoting at length, as they summarise the whole experiment, and some of the indications on the choice of photographs may also support my own interpretation of the ones I present in this paper:

According to the method of interpreting adopted, either several telephonic interpretations may be given while the speech is being made (so-called instantaneous interpretation) or they may be given after the speech has been

made and while it is being interpreted from the platform into one of the official languages. The latter is known as the “simultaneous” method. In practice, direct or instantaneous interpretation raises certain difficulties. It is hard for the interpreter, however well he may be trained, to translate the speech word for word, particularly when the speaker’s delivery is rapid and when statistics are quoted. This method is therefore only used occasionally, and telephonic interpretation is mainly simultaneous.

The idea of working out a system of simultaneous interpretation is due to Mr. Edward A. Filene, the well-known Boston business man, who, as early as 1924, informed the Secretary General of the League of Nations that he intended to discover some system for interpreting simultaneously into one or several languages the important speeches made at the League of Nations Assemblies. Mr. Filene thought, quite rightly, that such a system would have a considerable influence on the proceedings by: a) saving time; b) speeding up the debate, and consequently securing increased attention from delegates; c) making it possible for speakers who were not familiar with the official languages to reply promptly and refer to points made in speeches.

In 1925, Mr. Filene offered to instal (*sic*) equipment at his own expense. The first attempts at telephonic interpretation were made during the 1925 Session of the International Labour Conference. By 1928 a complete set of equipment was in operation, and simultaneous interpretation could be heard in six different languages. Except for certain details, the system of interpretation remains the same. The photographs shown below, which were taken during a Session of the International Labour Conference, illustrate the operation of the system. (File O 304/5, 1935 *Collection of photographs illustrating simultaneous telephonic interpretation. Telephonic interpretation during a Session of the International Labour Conference*, pp. 1-2).

The explanation about the two different systems in this “how-to” description is somewhat confusing, in the sense that *instantaneous* interpretation would be what we now call *simultaneous*, whereas what the text calls simultaneous would be a kind of delayed *instantaneous* interpretation into several non-official languages, performed while the original speech (in English or French) was being interpreted into the other official language in the consecutive mode. In this case, time would not be saved compared to the regular system, and its only advantage would be to offer a wider range of languages. I have explained elsewhere that the simultaneous experiment in itself was a challenge that was tackled in several stages, under the early assumption – quite soon proved wrong – that it was impossible for the interpreter to listen to one language and transfer the content of the speech into another while the speaker continued to speak (Baigorri-Jalón 2014/2000, 136 *et seq.*). The assessment, probably made through participant observation,

that *instantaneous* interpreters would have more difficulty dealing with fast speeches and those full of statistics makes a lot of sense in retrospect.

The availability of photos with general views of the ILO conference(s) where SI was being tested allows the viewer to see a sort of uniform *roomscape* in which representatives from opposing social classes rubbed shoulders with each other in a sort of coexistence where the “other” could be perceived in close quarters and on an institutionally equal footing. International civil servants with professional status, including interpreters, and delegates from the governments or the other branches are shown in photographs camouflaged in a similar – formal – attire, an important recognition factor for interpreters at a time when their professional category was under construction. In fact, the identity shown by these images is not that of a “conference interpreter” without qualifications – a “work in progress” in the 1920s (Baigorri-Jalón 1998, 2005) – but rather the identity of a “simultaneous interpreter”, a totally new specimen in the professional directories, in this case under the umbrella of an international organisation (Sanz 1930). Conference interpreters until then worked in the consecutive mode and were highly visible in the meeting. These ILO photos do not privilege the self, in the sense that most of the photographed interpreters are anonymous, unknown to the potential observers of the images or even to the recipients of their services. When working in the simultaneous mode, interpreters were located outside the view of their users (delegates, journalists, other language-related officials, the public at times), so they were not easily recognised. They can be seen as a metaphor of the coeval second industrial revolution, like cogs in a machine, an idea that pervades some of the comments in the ILO written records, for instance when they compare “oral” translation with “telephonic” translation, as if the latter were not oral but mechanical.

This photo shows British engineer Alan Gordon-Finlay posing while pretending to be using or testing a hush-a-phone, a device which was first manufactured in 1921 (Gordon 1997). It was designed to reduce noise while allowing communication as the user spoke softly into the mouthpiece of a telephone, to which the device was originally applied. Its application to an interpreter’s microphone improved the voice transmission without disturbing other adjacent interpreters or the audience.



Figure 1: Telephonic interpretation. Alan Gordon-Finlay, ca. 1927 (courtesy of the ILO Historical Archives).

Alan Gordon Finlay was born in Turramurra, New South Wales, Australia on 8 June 1890. He was brought up in Switzerland and had a good command of French and German. He graduated from the Royal Military College in Sandhurst (UK) and served in Afghanistan (Flerov 2016). His record during WWI, according to his grandson, shows that in 1914 he served in King Edward's Horse 2nd battalion at the front in Ypres and that he was decorated and promoted to captain as a consequence of outstanding action in that theater of operations, where he was a victim of chlorine gas in the trenches and, as a result, sent back to England in 1915 to recover. That year he was assigned to work at William Foster & Co., in Lincoln, in the development of tanks, a job he continued with the French in Paris, in coordination with Foster & Co. Since his childhood Finlay showed great interest in technical inventions – he even wrote a patent at the age of eight – and he was a ham radio fanatic. The latter must have contributed to the development of the engineering abilities he put at the service of the Filene-Finlay SI system concept (Electronic personal communication with Dr. Guy Loftus, Alan Gordon Finlay's grandson, May 2020). According to the League of Nations Search Engine, he was appointed to Inter-Allied and Anglo-American Commissions in Paris during 1918 and 1919. He would serve in the LON

First Division at the Précis-Writer Department with temporary contracts, alternating with other activities outside the LON (League of Nations Search Engine). He married Florence Mary Gallagher and had two children. He passed away in January 1959 in Uckfield, Surrey, England (Flerov 2016).¹ Finlay was responsible for many of the technical specifics of the Filene-Finlay “translator”, which would become the system used at the ILO and at other institutions on loan for their conferences. That system was patented by Edward Filene and later used under IBM patent at the Nuremberg Trials, under Colonel Dostert’s coordination, where US Signal Corps electrical equipment was also used.

The following are excerpts of the patent application filed by Filene in 1930 for his simultaneous translation system:

This invention relates to a method and apparatus for use where speeches or the like delivered in one language must be translated into other languages for the convenience or full understanding of persons to whom the subject-matter of the speeches is of interest and importance, and the general object of the invention is to provide apparatus whereby such requirements can be met efficiently. [...] The objects of the invention are attained in general in the following manner: All of the translations are made by interpreters suitably positioned with respect to the speaker and their translations are delivered to the audience by telephony. For this purpose each interpreter is provided with an individual microphone connected through an amplifier to telephone receiving instruments installed at various parts of the hall occupied by the audience, each receiving instrument being provided with selector means whereby any one of the translators may be selected for reception. (US Patent Office, Application serial No. 451,814, May 12, 1930, patent 1,874,480, August 30, 1932, p. 1)

The Filene-Finlay system was in fact an electrical installation which allowed for the reception of sound and its distribution through different lines in various languages. However, the real interpreting system was not the electrical setting but the interpreters’ brains and vocal cords, a point usually omitted as if technology itself could carry out the oral translation process, perhaps hinting at future machine translation processes. Indeed, machine translation was tested as early as 1951 in an IBM-Georgetown experiment, behind which we find Colonel Dostert (Vasconcellos 2000), an interpreter himself and the architect of the SI mode at the Nuremberg Trials and at the United Nations.

¹ Further information on Alan Gordon Finlay can be found in a recent Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Gordon_Finlay.