Reminiscences of post-WWII conference interpreting: International unions


When the victorious alliance broke apart immediately after the Second World War, and country by country Eastern Europe fell under the sway of communist regimes, it was inevitable that the hitherto united socialist trade union movement would split into two blocks.

Communist unions, such as the French Confédération Générale du Travail, remained in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU); non-communist socialist unions based on principles of Western democracy, e.g. the British Trade Union Congress (TUC), united in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

The founding conference of the ICFTU took place in London at the end of December 1949. I happened to work at the preparatory conference in Geneva in the spring of that year. The venue was the main hall of the Maison Communale de Plainpalais. Mrs Marie Ginsberg, former librarian of the League of Nations, had by then created her conference service and was in charge of interpretation at these international trade union conferences. At that time there was no portable simultaneous interpretation equipment available in Geneva [1], yet there was a very real need for interpretation. As full consecutive interpretation in the six languages required (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and "Scandinavian" [2]) was out of the question, Mrs Ginsberg suggested an ingenious solution: simultaneous consecutive interpretation. Participants were divided into language groups and gathered in different areas of the vast meeting hall. As some of these groups were very large, whispering interpretation was excluded. All speakers had to address the meeting from an elevated rostrum. There were no loudspeakers, but in those times whoever wanted to address a large public gathering had to have a voice that carried a few hundred meters. The interpreters took notes and at the end of each speech they all interpreted into their respective language at the same time for the group gathered around them. So, with one exception, the time needed for five versions did not exceed that of a single consecutive interpretation between two languages. The exception: as none of the interpreters working into English, French, German, Italian and Spanish knew any of the Scandinavian languages, speeches in Scandinavian were first interpreted into English by our Danish colleague Juul Poulson and then taken over by the other four interpreters. There were six of us in all; I worked into German. We spoke standing up and when we had finished we lifted a sheet of cardboard with our language marked on it, thus enabling the chairman to know which of the language groups had been serviced. Only when all were done did he give the floor to the next speaker.

Two things were striking in this exercise. (1) The five interpretations never ended exactly at the
same moment because, on the one hand, more time was needed to render the original into some of the languages, and on the other hand, the different versions required more or less time according to the technique and temperament of the interpreter. (2) Jokes or other humorous comments never elicited the same intensity or duration of laughter in the six language groups, depending no doubt on the skill of the interpreter to render the joke, on the sense of humour of the delegates of this or that language group, or simply, on the translatability of the joke.

Still, this simultaneous consecutive interpretation, although raising quite a cacophony in the room while interpreting was on, was a complete success.

[1] Some time later Marie Ginsberg was the first, to my knowledge, to offer mobile simultaneous interpretation equipment on the private market under the name of SIMULTA with Mr. Dorier as chief technician.

[2] "Scandinavian" was a way of speaking among interpreters at that time, including the few colleagues from up north such as Juul Poulsen (Denmark) and Sven Backlund (Sweden). In fact, Poulsen told me that for trade union meetings he used a kind of "lingua inter-scandinavia" when interpreting from English since many of the Swedish or Norwegian delegates would have trouble understanding pure Danish pronunciation.

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