

Roles of Interpreters in a Multilingual Multicultural Society
(Perspectives on Interpretation: Experiences of a Participant-Observer, 1939-2005)

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by

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We are gathered here today on the occasion of the seventh anniversary of the founding of the *Japan Association of Interpretation Studies*. In Panama, my native country, seven is a very lucky number and always marks a most auspicious occasion. For example, we think that is the age when a person reaches the ability to reason properly. Your impressive and constant membership growth during these past years suggests that you are well on your way to sustainable development and that many persons in Japan have reasoned wisely on the importance that an association such as JAIS may have for our profession.

Today, I will try to bring to your attention some thoughts that have been with me ever since I was approached about a year ago in Tampere and asked if I would consider joining you in this celebration. I immediately said I would be very glad to come because, not only do I have very fond memories of all my trips to this beautiful country; I have very personal reasons to celebrate your success.

It is a great honor to be asked by one's colleagues to share with them insights about the profession one has practiced and loves, and, for me, this honor stirs, as well, deep memories of events in my formerly active professional life. With your forbearance then, it will be from a very personal and true life perspective that I will present to you my own listing of the

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many roles that a natural interpreter may be called upon to fulfill in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural society.

The *Japan Association of Interpretation Studies* is many things that are dear to me. In several ways it is a dream come true:

- it is an organization that has defined itself as a grouping of persons interested in the academic aspects of our profession; and, if nothing else, I pride myself in being someone who has long struggled to open Academia's doors to interpretation studies.
- JAIS is an association that aims to promote the scientific and multidisciplinary research of our activity;
- and I strongly believe that without such research, our field cannot become a *bona fide* profession.
- JAIS is an organization dedicated to promoting the education of interpreters;
- something we all know is an essential factor in the **professionalization** of an occupation or trade; and, as if this were not enough,
- JAIS is an association that wants to contribute to the better social understanding and acceptance of our profession – an aspiration we all hold dear.

In the early 1980s, when I founded, with similar goals and objectives, the *Translators and Interpreters Educational Society* in California, the strongest persecution ensued and my efforts were considered and labeled subversive. The time was not ripe then for an academic and scientific organization and TIES could not muster up the required collegial support. TIES could not survive the test of time for I had to leave the United States to come to Taiwan and found its Graduate Institute for Translation and Interpretation Studies (GITIS). So, it is with a very special feeling of satisfaction that I come here today to participate in your celebration.

My deeply felt thanks to the JAIS Board of Directors for this invitation; and for the opportunity to discuss with you some experience-based perspectives that are frequent *food for thought* for this now aging gardener.

The theme chosen for this Conference enjoins us to examine the role of interpreters in multi-lingual, multi-cultural societies. This is not an easy task --- 4 of the 5 key words in the title lack generally agreed upon definitions:

- we don't all agree on exactly *what characterizes* a person's role or *defines* his or her social behavior,
- society is unsure about *what an interpreter does* – or how interpretation is done,

- how are we to define a multi-lingual person, if we have *yet to define* a language as such?,
- and, the term *multi-cultural* certainly tests our ability to circumscribe all **that** which we can call **cultural!**

Many, many centuries ago, a colleague of ours was asked what it meant to be multi-lingual. I have always loved his reply; used to discuss its meaning with my students in Monterey and they chose it as the motto for **Concordiat**, the student association they created. **Ennius**, our long-gone colleague, defined his multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism by stating:

Tria corda habere
- - -
I have three heart,
I have three souls,
since I speak Greek and know Oscan and Latin.

You will ask me, *what roles was multi-lingual, multi-cultural Ennius called upon to fulfill in those days?* Ennius is famous for being an *agent of change*, an *innovator* – a *proponent* of new ways of doing things. In his case, a new way of writing poetry in Latin.

Ennius was a *teacher* of Greek to prominent Romans. As such, he wielded great power and was influential in bringing new knowledge into another culture. He was for many now-famous Romans a *window* into the alien and unknown Greek culture. Ennius was, then, an interpreter, a translator, a communicator, an agent of change, a mediator and bridge between Greeks and Romans of his time.

Let me provide you with a different perspective on multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism – one that touches me personally. I was born into a multi-lingual family, which caused my Irish grandmother to request of my mother the promise that her only grandchild would be educated in an English-speaking school system.

Upon hearing this, I am told, my Chinese grandfather, who spoke four Western languages, remarked: *My poor child, she will not know to which world she belongs...*

How very right he was!

I am sure anyone who has grown up straddling at least two languages **and** two cultures will agree with my grandfather. Those who have to learn another language envy us, who have

been called *a-lingual* --- and we, in turn, envy their monolingual assurance, their perceived true mastery of **one** language. We envy the very fact that when joining AIIC acquired bilinguals have no doubt about which language to declare as their A or B languages. For us, such a simple choice may even require traumatic decisions.

Brian Harris in Canada has studied *alinguals* and classified some of us as *natural interpreters* – persons whose role has been, to a large extent, brought upon them by family circumstances or happenstance. Many interpreters who are native speakers of sign languages will tell you that this has been their case. Their congenital bilingualism forced them to assume the role of *natural interpreters* for the non-bilingual or non-hearing members of their family or community. Their biculturalism established them as *cultural informants* between the speaking and the hearing impaired communities. Society, then, imposes upon the multi-lingual, multi-cultural person many roles.

But what happens in the academic world? It was upon entering the peculiar culture of Academia that I, as a professional, was thrust, from the very beginning, into the many roles that I want to present to you today.

Let's focus for a while on how interpretation schools or programs handle multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism. And let's start with the most important persons in the educational process: **the students!**

Who is a likely candidate for the **role of student** in a T&I school? What do admissions officers and many teachers think that a person who speaks more than one language should study? -- Translation or interpretation, of course! Never mind the ability factor! Never mind if the person likes or dislikes the field of study! -- Such was my case at the University of Geneva.

The university admissions officer heard my English and immediately determined that my place was in the recently founded School of Interpreters. She quickly stipulated that graduation from this school would be a pre-requisite for admission to any other School or Faculty at that University. Little did I know, then, to what extent she was changing, and defining, my life's work!

Mind you, her decision was based **only** on the fact that she **liked** the sound of my English! To her, knowing the language was a sufficient criterion for admission to the School of

Interpreters. And yet, in the West, schools of interpretation studies have routinely found out that students who have studied languages do not necessarily make good candidates for T&I studies. Fortunately for me, my background was in science -- I had never studied, formally, any language.

So, we should examine and define very carefully what constitutes appropriate and required aptitude for entry into our schools and programs. This is not a trivial question for, after all, a person's professional future and a whole lifetime of work may be at stake.

But what happens when we go beyond the admissions office and examine the institution? – for example, what happens when an institution has decided it wants or needs to establish a T&I program or school? What do they look for in the person they need to hire? I like to think that, today, institutions are very careful about how they go about establishing T&I programs – yet, I know that, what I will describe to you as my own experiences are still true for the most part. This is especially the case in countries that lack a centralized system of higher education where ministries of education strictly regulate the university system or define university faculty status.

In 1968, we had a revolution in Panama, my native country. Soon afterwards, I had to close my publishing business and decided to look for a job at the state university. I walked into the University of Panama wanting to teach graphic arts; about an hour later, I walked out having been designated the new director and creator of the second graduate-level program that university was willing to establish!

Why the urgency? Panama was preparing to battle the United States for the Panama Canal and its position needed to be translated and interpreted into other languages. Hence, the need to train translators and interpreters had become a national priority.

I told the Dean not to worry; I would be back in half an hour with a model curriculum for training translators and interpreters! I can still see the look and the smile in his face in my mind's eye! Ah... the enthusiasm of youth and ignorance! – forty-two years later I am still struggling to find that model curriculum!

Did anyone ask me if I could assume all the roles that were required for the job that was being offered? Definitely not! Did anyone ask me if I knew anything about Academia, its

closed and fixed culture, or its way of doing things? Of course not! What is more, absolutely **no** explanation whatsoever, or induction into the academic culture system, was ever offered!

Because I was born into a multi-lingual, multi-cultural family, I became multi-lingual, multi-cultural; because I was a natural multi-lingual, I was assigned the role of student in the Geneva school; because I was a graduate of that school, I was now thrown into the role of director and creator of a graduate level program. Three years later, because I had directed that program in Panama, I was offered the deanship of the school in Monterey – two days into my informal and brief touristic visit there.

Only upon arrival in Monterey to assume the deanship, was I informed of a department-wide student strike that had resulted from a complete fiasco with a curricular design that centered on language and international studies. I found out, then, why I had been offered the job so expeditiously!

I was told to do whatever was needed to satisfy the students, and I was given two weeks to establish a Mandarin program and find, **in 1974**, a professional interpreter who would come to Monterey (then considered to be in the middle of nowhere) and teach Mandarin-English T&I. Did anyone ask whether I could do this? Not at all! – the assumption was that my impressive looking diploma was a magic wand that made me omniscient.

How many roles does a person charged with such responsibilities have to juggle? What knowledge and skills did I find out were essential to those important roles? Before I even attempt to answer this question, please remember the following: the **mere** fact that you have assumed the role of instructor, the **very** fact that you have been appointed a faculty member in a T&I program, defines you as a potential administrator, a potential policy and decision-maker, an academic and professional Jack-of-all-trades.

What is more, the mere fact that you have held the **role of student** in such a program, can place you in such positions. You would be surprised at how many alumni and former students end up in Academia as teachers in T&I programs! In most cases, professional qualifications will be solicited – but, rarely, is knowledge or experience in Academia required. We know this perspective is changing – but the road ahead is still a steep one.

To me, the most important roles that an interpreter fulfills when entering Academia either as a **faculty member** or as an **administrator**, are being *an insider, a role model, a benchmarker, a guide, a counselor, a gatekeeper and a mentor*.

*Why is being **an insider** first and foremost?* Because you cannot teach what you do **not know** or what you have **not experienced!** It is **inside knowledge** about professional practice that provides you with the tools, knowledge and skills you need to effectively fulfill your role as a teacher of interpretation. It was the Geneva school experience and professional practice that saved my skin back then – it provided the insight on lesson planning, curriculum and program design, testing, and ideas about what a future practitioner needed to know and master. And it provided ties to a network of former classmates that found for me, in two week's time, the Mandarin teacher I needed!

Why do I say being a role model is important? and, what does this imply? A model can be defined as **an example to follow or imitate** – therefore, being a role model implies, for me, that **the teacher of interpretation** be someone with experience, with real life practice, professional insights, and, high values. The **teacher of interpretation** is someone the students can **imitate**.

Why is this teacher a benchmarker? Because students need a point of reference; they must be able to **measure up** to some **quality criterion** and - it is the teacher's responsibility to set and provide students a point of reference with respect to professional performance.

Why a guide? a teacher helps students form opinions; a teacher advises, shows the way, directs and positions students *vis-à-vis* professional norms, practice, and the workplace's ways of doing things.

Why a gatekeeper? Because interpreters are responsible for controlling access to professional practice. As professionals it is our responsibility to define what differentiates interpretation from any other form of multi-lingual activity. It is our responsibility to ensure that those **granted entry** into the profession meet, at the very least, minimal standards of performance. We are, after all, accountable to the workplace for quality service.

As I was fond to tell the raters who participated with me in the U. S. federal certification program: **you** are the profession's gatekeepers – you are the ones who decide whether an examinee is ready to work, **tomorrow**, in federal court – if you were a defendant, would you **trust this person** with your life, liberty and possessions? If so, then, this person has met the standards established for certification as a federal court interpreter.

Why do teachers have a role as counselors? The most trying and demanding role that I had to fulfill as a Dean or a T&I teacher, was that of being a counselor to my students. Without a

doubt , it was the most draining! T&I students, I **know**, are full of insecurities. The demanding cognitive task student interpreters are required to perform and master is clearly **out-of-the-ordinary**. Humans do not normally go about doing several things at the same time - while mindful of two different linguistic and cultural systems!

This extra-ordinary demand upon the student interpreter manifests itself frequently in self-doubts and much emotional stress. All this becomes compounded by the fact that the interpretation classroom is a place where the student faces constant critique and corrections - something we all find very hard to digest or even to get used to. Natural bilingual, bicultural students, especially, are severely affected by T&I studies because deeply rooted doubts emerge and they find themselves having to face difficult personal identity decisions. I strongly believe that T&I programs should include, in their staff, trained counselors and that T&I faculty members should be given some training in basic counseling techniques.

Last but not least, *why do interpreters play the role of mentors?* - especially in academic settings. Because we broker entry to possible jobs! We promote our colleagues before the job market. As instructional colleagues, senior T&I instructors often mentor novice instructors and much progress is achieved this way.

Until now, we have examined the roles that society and Academia imposes on us. Insofar as academic roles are concerned, the focus has been on teacher/student relationship. How about those institution-based roles that pertain to a teacher/program dichotomy?

The interpreter who is a faculty member is going to be called upon, institutionally, to wear many hats: master teacher, curriculum specialist, expert in testing development, program evaluator, performance assessor, and, of course, such a person must be somehow comfortable with and knowledgeable of instructional technology and the use of electronic and AV equipment. The list is almost endless.

When discussing an analogous list, a teacher of mine at Stanford told us not to worry because we were all experts. By the time we had become doctoral students, we had spent around 18 years in classrooms and therefore had first-hand knowledge and opinions about all these tasks. He was right! What he meant was that we all have very well-formed opinions about how such tasks should be done.

I **don't** want to imply or leave you with the impression that formal training in education science or pedagogy is a *sine qua non* for teaching interpretation. We all know master

teachers of interpretation that are superb natural teachers – and yet they lack a day of formal or structured pedagogical training. I **do** want to point out that master teachers, *pedagogically trained or not*, all share a common trait: long-standing introspection about the activity they are attempting to pass on to younger generations.

However, I **must** stress the fact that formal studies in education-related fields will become a necessity -- if you want to seriously dedicate your life to teaching, to research, to writing scientific papers, to breaking new ground. The difference between the pedagogically **trained** and the **un-trained** teacher lies in that the trained teacher knows how to use established scientific knowledge and theory as tools to aid his or her creativity and work.

Is such additional knowledge necessary for accomplishing your role of interpretation teacher? This was a decision I had to make at Monterey. While directing the Panama and Monterey programs, I needed to be a Jack-of-all trades – an expert in every imaginable educational, administrative and professional task -- and yet I had never had any formal studies in pedagogy or previous experience in higher education.

I had to solve problems for languages I did not know; and make teachers of translation and interpretation out of persons who could only offer exceptional linguistic or language expertise. I myself had **no** knowledge of the Academic culture and its ways of doing things. Prior to Stanford, I did not even know the difference between one educational term or another! This did not seem to hinder one iota my performance or efficiency.

But -- on several memorable occasions, this ignorance cost me dearly – and markedly changed the future course of my future life. I had going for me, my professional studies and interpreter experience in Geneva. But multi-culturalism was my spinal column -- as was my lifelong role as a natural interpreter – these were the pillars and filters that really guided my attempts at program design, methods development, standard-setting, and problem-solving, among others.

And then, in 1976, Drs. David Gerver and Wallace Sinaiko convened the landmark *Symposium on Language, Communication and Interpretation* in Venice, Italy. The United Nations had been paralyzed by a costly interpreter strike and NATO had invited the few teachers of interpretation that then existed to come meet with human factors researchers, sociolinguists, psychologists, and experts on multi-lingualism, such as Drs. Wallace Lambert and John Carroll.

A veritable *who's who* of spoken and sign language interpreter teachers was invited to participate in Venice. The goal: establish a cross-disciplinary network and an interdisciplinary research agenda for the 1980s.

I was young, naive, and very cocky then! I thought I knew what interpretation *training* was all about – after all, without considering, or knowing, the difference between education and training, I had already designed and directed two graduate programs. Two hours into the Venice Symposium evidenced, for me, the enormous depth of my ignorance -- as a whole new world of multi-disciplinary knowledge opened before me.

Ennius was with me when it was time to deliver my own paper and I confidently defined an interpreter as an intercultural communicator, proudly described the new Monterey program, postulated the need to train interpreters as intercultural communicators, and announced that from then on the basic core degree granted in Monterey would be a *Masters in Intercultural Communication*. Shock waves went through the established European interpreter crowd present. They did not hesitate to express their anger and to ask *how dare I* use a communication-cum-culture based definition for the interpretation task: Interpretation had to do with language -- **not** culture! **Not** communication! *Any* interpreter knew that! Could I **please** get that through my ignorant American head!

One interpreter present was among the few who came to my defense in the ensuing heated debate and a lifelong standing friendship was born: Dr. Mitsuko Saito-Fukunaga assured me I was not hallucinating and described for me the efforts she was carrying out, with a similar perspective, in Japan. Therefore, once again, I must thank the JAIS board of directors for inviting me and asking me to speak today, precisely, about multi-culturalism -- thus giving me this opportunity to pay tribute to a special colleague.

Venice, for me, meant the first links with the Far East and with the world of sign language interpretation, a group of interpreters that also defined interpretation as culture and communication-bound endeavors. Venice meant becoming a doctoral student at Sanford in search of the knowledge I had glimpsed at and now wanted to possess.

Much has changed in our profession since the early 1960s when I was a student, the 70s when I was creating schools and programs, and the 80s when I was busy as an activist promoting the creation of professional organizations or as an advocate before the US Congress defending the rights of the non-English speaking minorities.

I ask you: *How much change has really occurred?* The French remind us that the more things change, the more they remain the same. So let's end by examining our *role as professionals*, with special attention to the role of *profession's overseer* that JAIS has assumed and the future I see in the Asia Pacific region.

At this moment in time, when we have entered somewhat of an *interregnum* period between the XX and the XXI centuries, what can be said of our role as professionals? When we say "*I am a professional interpreter?*" is this just wishful thinking? How close are we to meeting established societal requirements for a profession? Has *professionalization* truly taken place? When *two disciplinary worlds* meet, what takes place?

Theorists have proposed that when such meetings take place, each discipline (side or profession) enters a so-called *negotiation process* in search of a jointly negotiated compromise agenda. The ensuing give-and-take gives birth to an agreed-upon agenda that satisfies both sides and which becomes the *implementation agenda*. The agendas (or platforms) that one or the other side defends are constituted by beliefs and values that are dear to each side. These beliefs and values can be visualized as *planks* which give structure and support to the **platform** or agenda under discussion or debate.

The Japan Association of Interpretation Studies, by its very vision and charter, has assumed an especially important role as overseer of a *professional closure platform* in Japan and promoter of the *professionalization planks* in this country. But it seems to me, JAIS has assumed responsibility for two platforms: a *professional* one and an *academic* one. The importance of these JAIS roles cannot be underestimated – especially if we consider emerging conditions in the Asia Pacific region.

Most professional interpretation programs or schools recognized as such by our profession have been modeled after the Geneva and the Sorbonne schools. Experiences in these schools were based, for the most part, on praxis germane to Western languages, situations and needs. A plethora of established teaching methods, ways of learning and teaching, etc. all originated in assumptions that may not be valid or true at this end of the world.

I know that my perspective on admissions requirements, level of language mastery, curricular structures, and over-all curricular planning needed for GITIS markedly changed after my experience there. I can truly say that all of my design and planning perspective

changed -- and were broadened and enriched -- after experiencing first-hand the needs of the Eastern interpretation world.

You all know better than I do the profound differences in language structures that exists between Western and Eastern languages -- a trait you share with our sign language interpretation colleagues. This fact alone, seems to me, may be reason enough to examine with different eyes and new perspective theoretical assumptions, the traditional lesson, exercises, and instructional design structures we currently use. My long talks with Saito-san, clearly pointed out the how and wherefor of professional entry in this country and why it so evolved. In this case, it may be wise not to follow the known advise of *monkey see, monkey do!* So, to me, in promoting the development of an Eastern school of interpretation studies, JAIS will be facilitating new knowledge that can only enrich our profession as a whole.

I did some research preparing for this keynote. In particular, I examined published writings during the past ten years. In my opinion, an interesting role emerges: I have called this the *role that state regulation* is having on the graduate training of interpreters who have obviously made a commitment to an academic career.

Seems to me that, contrary to the trend in the West, where spoken language interpreters are seeking doctorates offered by T&I schools; the Eastern interpreter is seeking doctoral credentials **outside** disciplinary lines (in sociolinguistics, second language acquisition, higher education, economics, anthropology, among other disciplines). This is particularly evident when one examines the background of presenters at the 2003 conference in Seoul.

Nothing could be more promising for our profession because we need teachers and researchers with multi-disciplinary expertise. Only then will findings be credible in other disciplines and within society in general. And this, as we all know, is an essential **and** *sine qua non* step in the professionalization process of any occupation.

I hope that when you gather to celebrate JAIS' second decade, as much progress will be discussed then as has been evident during this, its initial period of activity. My thoughts and well wishes will always be with you.

Thank you.

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