

Interpreter Training at the U.S. Department of State: Origins, Developments, and Current Practices

Dr. David B. Sawyer

It is a great honor to speak to you today at this event in celebration of the graduating students of the interpretation program here at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. It is a privilege to have this opportunity to share with you the work of the Office of Language Services at the U.S. Department of State and the training that we conduct for our contractors. It is a fitting occasion to deal with the topic of training, given the graduation ceremony this week, and in doing so I hope to give you a sense of our work in the field of diplomatic interpreting and the training that it requires. It is a pleasure to be here, and I would like to express my gratitude to the gracious hosts of Tokyo University for extending such a kind invitation to speak. I would especially like to thank Prof. Chikako Tsuruta who made this presentation possible. As head of the interpreting program, Prof. Tsuruta has spent countless hours preparing my visit and ensuring that my stay in Tokyo is a wonderful experience. Without her efforts, I would simply not be here. I would also like to thank the interpreters in the booths for their hard work. As we know, their task is not an easy one, and I shall do my best to heed the words of St. Jerome (c.342-420), who translated the Bible into Vulgate Latin and thus became the Patron Saint of Interpreters and Translators in the West: “Venerationi mihi semper fuit non verbosa rusticas sed sancta simplicitas”, or, in English I have always revered not crude verbosity but holy simplicity.¹

I am the Senior Diplomatic Interpreter for German at the Department of State and coordinate the training conducted in our office for contract interpreters, of which there are over 700 on our roster. I came to these responsibilities over three years ago due to my background as a conference interpreter and a former associate professor of

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interpretation and translation who specialized in the field of interpreter education, and in particular in the areas of curriculum and assessment.

Today I would like to provide an overview of the training that we conduct in Washington to ensure high-quality interpreting particularly in languages that are rising in demand and are thus difficult to staff, good examples being Arabic, Korean, and Mandarin Chinese, and the languages that are underrepresented in academic programs, such as Greek, Haitian Creole, Indonesian, Mongolian, Pashto, and Vietnamese. The Office of Language Services faces the unique challenge of staffing interpreting assignments in over 50 languages at all levels of diplomacy in a wide range of settings. Fluctuation in demand and the intermittent frequency of requests in some of these languages make it difficult to maintain sufficient numbers of active contractors on the roster. For this reason alone, our training efforts must be ongoing.

But before I discuss in detail our current training courses, I would like to provide some background information on the Office of Language Services and outline the history of interpreter training at the Department of State.

Overview of the Office of Language Services

The Office of Language Services is the entity that provides interpreting and translation services for the U.S. President and Secretary of State, and other senior officials in the White House and Department of State. In addition, Language Services supports the Department's exchange programs, such as the International Visitor Leadership Program administered by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.² We also provide language services to other Departments and federal agencies on a reimbursed basis, in part because we are the only office of the U.S. Government that has staff conference interpreters.

The Office of Language Services is not the only organization at the Department of State that has language use at the core of its mission. There are two other State Department entities that provide language services. Firstly, the Bureau of International Information Programs maintains a public diplomacy website that is localized into six languages (Arabic, French, Mandarin Chinese, Persian, Russian, and Spanish).³ It is an excellent source of information about U.S. policy and government. Secondly, the Foreign Service Institute, the educational training center of the Department, provides language instruction for diplomats and civil service employees.

² <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/ivp/>.

³ <http://www.america.gov>.

Let me turn now to the structure of Language Services. The Office is divided into two divisions: the Interpreting Division and the Translation Division. There are also two supporting units: an Administrative Unit, which is the logistical and administrative backbone of the Office, and the Assigning Unit, which staffs interpreting assignments for the International Visitor Leadership Program. In total, we provide services in over fifty languages and have about sixty people who work in our office. More than forty staff interpreters and translators work into over fifteen languages and translate or interpret out of many more, but Language Services relies upon contractors if the volume of work does not merit a staff position. In some of the main world languages, such as Japanese, but also Arabic, French, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish, for example, the demand is so great that it cannot be met by staff interpreters alone, and an extensive roster of contract interpreters must be maintained.

The Office of Language Services provides interpreting services on three levels. For the International Visitor Leadership Program, Language Services provides (1) consecutive liaison and (2) simultaneous seminar interpreters for international visitors who spend between several days and four weeks either at one location or traveling in the United States. These interpreters are referred to as consecutive and seminar interpreters. They work in small group settings and, in the case of seminar interpreting, use portable equipment for the simultaneous mode, because the meeting venue changes several times during the course of the day and each meeting lasts one to one-and-a-half hours. The work of these interpreters differs significantly from the (3) high-level diplomatic consecutive and simultaneous work that staff and contract conference interpreters provide for the President, Secretary, and other senior government officials and groups. This is true of both the subject matter and the settings. Diplomatic interpreting also differs from work in the private conference sector and wider freelance market. Such differences are due to the settings, the principals and their relationships, patterns of discourse, and the role of the media. For these reasons, Language Services provides customized training following teaching objectives that are tailored to the language combination and staffing requirements at each of the three levels.

With origins dating back to 1781, Language Services was officially established by Thomas Jefferson when he organized the Department of State in 1790 and, as the first Secretary of State, hired a French translator by the name of Phillip Freneau. Most of the work focused on the written word during the nineteenth century, although there were interpreter positions at Embassies in China, Japan, and Turkey in the second half. The rise in demand for interpreting led to the establishment of a corps of student-interpreters at the beginning of the previous century.

Requests for interpreting services increased dramatically after the Second World War, when the advent of simultaneous interpretation at the Nuremberg Trials and the frequent travel of statesmen and diplomats resulted in a rapid rise in demand. It was at this point

that the number of staff interpreters in Washington began to grow and languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese were brought in-house.

Since the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization in the nineties, Language Services has continued to experience exponential growth, including in language combinations for which too few interpreters are being trained in educational programs at colleges and universities.

Origins of Interpreter Training

Interpreter training enjoys a long history at the Department of State, stretching back to the early nineteenth century. Much of the information on training during this early period was collected by former staffer Ruth Cline, with contributions from others, in an unpublished paper entitled History of the Office of Language Services. She writes that

[t]he position of interpreter, a language officer who prepared written translation, handled oral communications, and sometimes handled the accounts, had existed for decades in Turkey, China, and Japan, and in 1895 this position was extended to the Legations of Persia, Korea, and Siam. In 1902 the Department requested Congressional authorization to create a corps of student interpreters, selected on a nonpartisan basis, to be attached to the Legation at Peking. At the post they were to study Chinese and, hopefully, provide language support for ten years. In 1906 student interpreters were sent to the Embassy at Tokyo. (23)

Cline states that these steps were unprecedented and cites William Barnes and John Heath Morgan's *The Foreign Service of the United States: Origins, Development and Functions*:

These programs were the first significant measures taken to provide the Diplomatic and Consular Services with language skills, and the application of the merit principle to the positions represented a further commitment to the idea of a nonpartisan service.⁴

Comprehensive testing was quickly incorporated into the program, although these early tests focused on general knowledge and translation skills, rather than interpreting. Citing the Register of the Department of State, Cline states that

[t]he two-day entrance examination for the Student-Interpreter Corps, as prescribed by the Executive Order of June 27, 1906, required six hours per day. The students were required to make a close and idiomatic translation of a passage in a modern

⁴ Department of State, Historical Office, Bureau of Public Affairs, pp. 156-157.

language (choice of French, German, or Spanish) and then translate an English passage into that same modern language.⁵

The applicants were then asked to answer five or more questions on the following subjects: natural, industrial, and commercial resources and commerce of the United States; the political economy; international, maritime, and commercial law; American history, government, and institutions; political and commercial geography; arithmetic; and the modern history (since 1850) of Europe, South America, and the Far East.⁶

The program was thus established, and further steps to formalize it were undertaken during the years that followed, notably by conducting ongoing assessment to monitor participants' progress and formal testing for admission to the position of interpreter. Cline reports that Secretary Philander C. Knox issued a set of Regulations Governing Interpreters and Student Interpreters in China, Japan, and Turkey in 1909. According to these regulations, successful candidates were appointed by the Secretary of State and required to report for duty to the head of the mission where they were to serve abroad. At post, they studied the foreign language, and quarterly reports on their character, efficiency, and progress were sent to the Secretary. After two years of experience, the student interpreters were required to pass a moderately difficult oral and written language examination on topics such as history, geography, commerce, and the institutions and laws of the country in question, so that they were prepared for their duties as either interpreters or consular officers.⁷

Passing this examination qualified the student to be promoted to the position of Interpreter. The number of interpreters was limited to three in Japan, five in China, and three in Turkey. Examinations after two additional years entitled the student-interpreters to salary increases and promotions, and final examinations were administered after yet another two years, bringing the total number of training years to six.⁸

According to Cline, "these interpreters became an important and stable source of language support."⁹ Between 1902 and 1926, fifty-three student interpreters served in China, twenty-seven in Japan, and a smaller number in Turkey. In 1926, twenty-seven officers who had received instruction in Chinese and fourteen who had received instruction in Japanese were still in service. Eventually the diplomatic and consular

⁵ December 28, 1909, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1909, p. 49.

⁶ Cline, *History of the Office of Language Services*, pp. 24-25.

⁷ p. 25.

⁸ p. 26.

⁹ p. 27.

services were merged under the Rogers Act of 1924, and the student interpreters integrated into the unclassified group of Foreign Service officers.¹⁰

Further Developments

Few records exist on training efforts from the 1930s through the end of the previous century, although it is certain that staff and contractors were provided training as needed and that much institutional memory from this period of rapid expansion in interpreting services has not been documented and risks being lost. In “Interpreting for the White House: Historical Origins and Contemporary Practice”,¹¹ Harry Obst, the former Director of the Office of Language Services, mentions the high number of master consecutive interpreters who served after the Second World War and the mentoring role that they played. There were also intermittent courses to train interpreters, in particular for the International Visitor Leadership Program, and other agencies turned to the Office of Language Services to provide training for their language staff. Few records of these efforts are available.

After the end of the Cold War and during the rise of the period of globalization, the demand for interpreting in languages of critical political and strategic importance rose steadily, resulting in strong demand for contract interpreters that has not been met by the market. Given the lack of training opportunities for practitioners of these language combinations in academic settings, Language Services has found it expedient to conduct courses for contractors at a range of levels under a renewed, centralized effort in Washington. Some facts and figures from a two-year period will illustrate these developments.

Current Practices

From 2004 to 2006, Language Services provided seventeen weeklong courses for a total of 138 participants in seventeen languages.¹² Each course had a maximum number of fourteen participants. Many were full-time interpreters and translators, and almost all had some form of employment that would have prevented them from dedicating more than one week at a time to training. The courses targeted a range of skill levels, including introductory consecutive, introductory simultaneous, consecutive and simultaneous enhancement, and high-level diplomatic consecutive and simultaneous.

¹⁰ p. 27.

¹¹ Ed. Horst W. Drescher, *Transfer. Übersetzen—Dolmetschen—Interkulturalität. 50 Jahre Fachbereich Angewandte Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz in Gernersheim*, Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 1997, pp. 63-74.

¹² Arabic, Bangla, Bulgarian, Haitian Creole, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Macedonian, Mandarin Chinese, Slovenian, Pashto, Persian/Dari, Persian/Farsi, Turkish, Uzbek, and Vietnamese.

The curriculum model, teaching methodology, and materials were developed specifically for these courses. The approach to curriculum design is holistic and modular, and the course content includes, to the greatest extent possible, all areas of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are required of the interpreter to perform well in diplomatic settings. Narrow sets of skills are targeted in course segments or modules, which include the following:

- Introduction to consecutive
- Review of fundamental skills
- Introduction to simultaneous
- Liaison interpreting
- Formal consecutive
- Simultaneous
- Simultaneous with text
- Relay interpreting
- Simulations of bilateral meetings
- Simulations of press conferences
- Simultaneous of toasts and other formal occasions
- Ethics and professional conduct
- Administrative briefings
- Guidelines for self-study and practice
- Terminology enhancement
- Voice management

Not all courses include all modules; the course goals and skill levels of the participants determine which combination is most appropriate. The selected modules are carefully sequenced according to the role of the module and its objectives in the course, which facilitates a focus on specific teaching objectives at certain times.

The instructional methodology reflects the process of first acquiring component skills and then proceeding to composite skills, following the well-established sequence of simple to complex tasks. The flexible use of instructional modules helps ensure that the course can be modified or adapted according to the participants' progress. A repertoire of lesson plans enables instructors to select the most appropriate activity, perhaps in terms of task difficulty, available time, or student collaboration, as a given course unfolds. A range of instructional formats are used, which also provides variety in classroom activities and social situations, with examples including lectures, small group work, work in pairs, and individual reflection. These steps ensure that learning experiences are diverse.

Team-teaching is an integral part of the teaching methodology. A weeklong course generally involves the participation of at least three instructors, and up to seven

individuals, mostly staff interpreters, may teach. Team-teaching allows each instructor to focus on an area of specialization. A senior practitioner in the language combination in question co-teaches with the course leader throughout the week. Staff interpreters teach individual modules as their schedules permit. For example, a senior diplomatic interpreter, who also taught at the European Union institutions, teaches the introduction to consecutive interpreting module. In addition, he also has over twenty years of experience interpreting at international press conferences and is therefore an ideal instructor for that segment. A senior staff interpreter for Ukrainian teaches a module on interpreting toasts and at other formal occasions. A professional voice coach teaches sessions on voice management, and administrative staff and program officers brief participants on the logistical aspects of various types of assignments.

Both primary and secondary materials are used in the courses. These categories follow the traditional definitions in education and research and provide a useful instructional framework. Primary materials deliver the content of instruction and include videotapes, audiotapes, transcripts, translations of transcripts, discussion materials, talking points, glossaries, and subject matter background materials like parallel reading. Secondary materials include syllabi, lecture handouts, theoretical reading, bibliographies, feedback and assessment forms for courses, students, instructors, and test administration materials, such as test specifications, test passages, guidelines for test use, guidelines for scoring, and scoring forms, among others.

The primary materials—the speeches to be interpreted—are authentic in that they are representative of the tasks that are required of the interpreter and cover the range and depth of tasks that the interpreter may encounter. Most importantly, the empirical design and development of these materials—they are taken from interpreted events—ensure that there is a match between the goals and objectives of the course and the work to be performed; the classroom activities, tests, and work on assignments correspond in their difficulty. The classroom exercises closely simulate the actual work of the interpreter and the settings and working conditions in which that work is performed. There is therefore a direct relationship between course materials, course goals, teaching objectives, and tasks in the workplace, which helps participants learn real-world interpreting tasks specific to the assignments of Language Services and perform well on the job.

Some statistics from a small study¹³ conducted to determine how the course participants acquired their working languages are a good source of information on their background.

¹³ The results of this study were first reported in a presentation entitled *Interpreter Training at the U.S. Department of State: Heritage Speakers as Course Participants* delivered at the joint conference of the American Association of Applied Linguists and the Association Canadienne de Linguistique Appliquée/Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics held from June 4-6, 2006, in Montreal.

Between January 2004 and June 2006, sixty-five men and fifty-six women attended courses. They were between twenty and sixty-eight years old with levels of education ranging from undergraduate coursework to Ph.D.'s. They had spent between one and fifty-five years in the United States. Most were already practicing interpreters and/or translators. Less than ten had no previous translation and interpreting experience. Some had Master of Arts degrees and more than twenty-five years of professional experience in the field. The majority were already working for Language Services before being invited to a course. There were seventy-two existing contractors in comparison to forty-nine new applicants.

How did the participants learn their languages? The vast majority—ninety-eight out of 121—did not grow up speaking English at home. They were first-generation immigrants who acquired English through school, work, and day-to-day life in the United States. Similarly, the vast majority of participants—107 out of 121—grew up speaking their other language in a home environment in a country other than the United States. The number of participants who grew up speaking a language other than English in a home environment in the United States was roughly equivalent to the number who learned the language through traditional study and extended stays in the countries where those languages are spoken. In other words, there were eight heritage speakers in comparison to six traditional language learners.

Finally, assessment is integrated. Self-assessment, ongoing assessment, and final tests are an integral part of the course curriculum. The primary materials are closely coordinated with the test materials; the latter are treated as part of the course package. Self-assessment begins with the needs analysis and continues with exercises during the course, including a review of recordings made during class. These ipsative assessment exercises require the participants to identify and describe their strengths and weaknesses and set their own goals for the course and beyond. Ongoing formative assessment is conducted through peer and instructor feedback in a group format during exercises, and private conversations towards the end of the week with each participant. On the last day of the course, there is also a summative final test, which is an important, albeit not the sole, criterion for passing the course and becoming eligible for assignments. During the test, attention is given to determining whether performance is consistent with performance over the course of the week and, if there are notable differences, what the reasons for those might be. Participants must pass the test to become contractors, but if a participant passes with borderline performance, there may be questions concerning his or her suitability for certain assignments. If assessment is integrated into the course, such questions can be addressed with a high degree of certainty and confidence.

In summary, a holistic and modular curriculum, flexible and adaptive teaching methods, authentic materials, simulation of the interpreting settings, team-teaching, and integrated

assessment are features of the course design that help make these learning experiences successful.

Outlook

What does the Office of Language Services look for in interpreters? Obviously, we are in need of interpreters who have consolidated skills in both consecutive and simultaneous at the highest levels. In addition, a thorough understanding of policy issues is required to perform this work effectively. In many languages for which there is little or no training available, individuals with the required skill set are very difficult to find. For this reason, we must train them ourselves. In some languages for which there is substantial training available, interpreters are in such demand that we simply need more, and they must be familiar with the requirements of our assignments.

Obviously, skilled interpreters possess not only interpreting skills, language and cultural skills, and knowledge of the subject matter, which are prerequisites, they are also able to adapt to a wide variety of settings, many of which are stressful. Diplomatic interpreting is about communication in complex, evolving situations. The interpreter must realize what is required of him or her in a given set of circumstances and take action quickly and with confidence. Professionalism and collegiality are two key traits.

In closing, I would like to convey to you the warm greetings of Ms. Patricia Arizu, the Chief Interpreter in the Office of Language Services. She wanted me to let you know that we are recruiting in all language combinations, including Japanese and the other languages spoken in the Orient. If you are able to work legally in the United States, that is, if you are a U.S. citizen, a green card holder, or have a visa that allows you to work in the United States, we would like very much to hear from you.

These are exciting times for Japanese and other languages spoken in Asia and Southeast Asia, because the demand for conference interpreting services is growing rapidly. The eurocentricity of the profession is being overcome. Young colleagues need to reach out and network, building bridges across countries and regions of the world. Don't isolate yourselves. Support one another, not only colleagues who share your language combination, but also colleagues on whom you must depend for relay and good working conditions and who depend on you.

Finally, I'd like to stress the importance of continuing your education in interpreting. Interpreting requires life-long learning. No matter where we work, we will always be confronted with new topics and new situations, because we work at the cutting-edge of politics, business, and society, which are constantly evolving. The courses I've described today are one possibility, and we have had seasoned practitioners who have benefited from familiarizing themselves with the requirements of diplomatic settings and the

logistics of our assignments. Perhaps this is not exactly what you, who are graduating this week, want to hear today, given that you are now at the end of a long and demanding program. I'm certain, though, that after you've enjoyed some well earned rest, you'll be eager to continue your professional development with renewed energy. And it is vitally important to your career that you do continue to broaden your horizons. Good interpreters are able to acquaint themselves with new topics and situations quickly, and to be able to do so, they must understand what it is that they do not yet know—to see their blind spots, as it were. In this sense, French novelist Anatole France once remarked that an “[e]ducation isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you do know and what you don't.” With these thoughts in mind, I urge you to go out and discover the world of interpreting. I wish you the best of success and much happiness in exercising this fascinating profession.

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