

# Interpreting at the United Nations: A historical overview

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The United Nations Organization was established in the San Francisco Conference in 1945, while WWII was still raging in different theaters of operations. If the League of Nations had only two official languages (English-French), the UN adopted a multilingual regime for its meetings: French, English, Spanish, Russian and Chinese –Arabic was added many years later. Some of the interpreters who had worked at Nuremberg joined along the way the recently created organization. Although the consecutive interpreting mode which was predominant at the League was also used at the United Nations, this organization adopted very soon (1947) the simultaneous interpreting mode as the preferred one, after a fierce battle between the two teams (consecutive and simultaneous). The 20% ratio of female interpreters reached in the early teams was similar to the Nuremberg figures, but their number increased gradually until recent times, which have witnessed an ongoing feminization process. (From draft program of the exhibition PIONEER FEMALE INTERPRETERS (1900-1953): BRIDGING THE GAP, Baigorri *et al.* curators, to be inaugurated November 28, 2018)

## Outline

- Resuming cosmopolitan conversation after WWII
- Sociology: generational evolution
- Technique: from consecutive to simultaneous (including remote) and from analogue to digital
- Professional evolution
- Discourse analysis: everything is political

*allegoria*

### Resuming cosmopolitan conversation after WWII

- The League of Nations and the International Labor Office, bilingualism (E-F) and (mostly) consecutive interpreting. Comintern's tests in SI.
- The Nuremberg Trial: four languages (E, F, G, R), simultaneous interpreting
- UN: five official languages (C, E, F, R, S) (> six, with the addition of Arabic), an X-ray of the political situation after WWII. Official languages as vehicles of communication and as power symbols.

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# Simultaneous interpreting tests

The League of Nations and the International Labor Office, bilingualism (E-F) and (mostly) consecutive interpreting. The Comintern's SI tests [right: Simultaneous interpreters VII Comintern, Moscow 1935, Photo: *Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), Moscow: 494-1-679-189*]



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Information on the tests at the Comintern can be found here:

## At the dawn of simultaneous interpreting in the USSR: Filling some gaps in history

### [Sergei Chernov](#)

This chapter provides new evidence on the invention of simultaneous interpreting (SI) in the 1920s using records from Russian archives discovered by this author. SI was first implemented in the USSR in 1928, which coincided with the first full-scale use of SI at the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva. Language problems of the era due to the declining use of French and waste of time associated with consecutive interpreting (CI) required a new solution, which was SI, proposed by E. Filene in the West and Dr. Epshtein in the USSR. Epshtein's three-interpreter method was perfected by engineer Goron and implemented at the 6th Comintern Congress in 1928. Finally, interpreters/ translators' profiles and working conditions in the 1930s are described briefly.

**Keywords:** telephonization of interpreting, three-interpreter method, simultaneous interpreting, Comintern, Filene-Finlay system

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## The San Francisco Conference, April-June 1945

That was the Conference that adopted the United Nations Charter. Interpreters had not been planned for the Conference, but the French Foreign Minister, Georges Bidault, had taken with him four highly prepared interpreters. After US Secretary of State, Stettinius, made the opening speech, he was surprised to see that a gentleman stood up and began translating into French. He wondered which delegation he represented! After the "incident", Stettinius provided interpreters with a lounge (Herbert 1978).

Right: UN photo/Mili. # 157978 Meeting of Commission III, Committee 4 on Regional Arrangements. French interpreter, Lt. **André Kaminker**, gives a translation of a point expressed by the Committee Chairman.



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## United Nations San Francisco Conference Top Translator

Right: Lt. André Kaminker of France sits at public UNCIO sessions and listens (as above) to speeches delivered in English. He doesn't take a single note. Then he gets up and repeats the speeches in French from memory, word for word, pause for pause –and with oratorical gestures tossed in for good measure.

ACME San Francisco Bureau, 34768-769. June 20, 1945



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## The San Francisco Conference, April-June 1945

Right: UN photo/Rosenberg # 160504

The San Francisco Conference: Coordination Committee Meeting in Opera House, May 24. Left to right: N.A. Robertson, Canada; H.M.G. Jebb, UK; **Mathieu**, Interpreter; Leo Pasvolsky, Chairman of the Committee; Charles F. Darlington, Executive Officer of Steering Committee; A. A. Sobolev of USSR. Last three unidentified. 24 May 1945, San Francisco, United States.

Mathieu would always think that real interpreting was consecutive interpreting, even when he became Head of the Translation Division at the UN (Baigorri-Jalón 2014/2004: 52-53)



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## Nuremberg Trial

Right: Witness and Defendants stand, Photo: Stadtmuseum Nürnberg.



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## Nuremberg Trial

Von Ribbentrop's  
headphones. Photo:  
Stadtmuseum  
Nürnberg.



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Pre-trial interrogatories

*Excerpt from Testimony of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, taken in Nurnberg, Germany, 11 October 1945, 1050-1230, by Lt. Col. Smith W. Brookhart, IGD. Also present: Capt. Mark Priceman, Interpreter; T/4 R. R. Kerry, Reporter.*

### *Use of Prisoners for Broadcasts to Allied Troops*

Q. Will you look at the make-up of Group IV A with sub-sections 1, 2, 3, and 4? What dealings did you have with any of the subchiefs? Consider the next name on the list, Kopkow. Did you have any dealings with him?

A. No. With this section I had no dealings. I met Kopkow only once. This was on the occasion when he was making a report to me. Kopkow's section was concerned with financial matters related to enemy agents.

*allegria*



**Technical revolution at  
the United Nations:  
Simultaneous  
interpreting (1946)**

Right: UN Photo# 189119

Interpreters with Control  
Board Broadcasting

"First test of simultaneous  
interpreting at the UN". The  
monitor who appears on the  
bottom right is **Mark  
Priceman**.

13 September 1946 United  
Nations (Lake Success), New  
York.

Priceman was Colonel  
Dostert's right hand at the SI  
experiment at the Nuremberg  
Trial and then at the United  
Nations.



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**Simultaneous Interpreters at the UN GA at Flushing Meadows, 12  
Dec. 1946. Colonel Dostert checking the lineup. Photo A75911**



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**Technical revolution at  
the United Nations:  
Simultaneous (1946)**

Right: UN photo #2228

**Colonel Leon Dostert,**  
organizer of simultaneous  
interpreting at the  
Nuremberg trials and at the  
UN, before 1950.



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SECOND SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY UN 7173  
Simultaneous interpreting New *alfozaga* Assembly Hall, Flushing Meadows,  
New York, 1947.  
Please credit UNATIONS.



## The People's Republic of China replaces Nationalist China (1971)

["Although the Chinese delegates, who all speak English fluently, never speak Chinese, it is the fifth 'official language' (*Harper's Magazine*, April 1974: 26). (Baigorri-Jalon 2014, 2004: 122)]

Right: UNphoto/Yutaka Nagata # 67326  
Delegation of the People's Republic of China Seated in General Assembly

The delegation of the People's Republic of China was today formally seated in the United Nations General Assembly. The delegation is seen here as photographers recorded the occasion on film. In the front row from left to right are: Chiao Kuan-hua, Chairman of the delegation; Huang Hua, Vice Chairman and Permanent Representative to the UN; and Fu Hao, Representative. In the second row from left to right are: Tang Weng Sheng, Interpreter; Hsiung Hsiang-hui, Representative; and Chen Chu, Representative.

15 November 1971, United Nations, New York



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## Technical revolution at the United Nations: SI by Satellite (1978). Arrival of the future.

Right: UN photo/ Yutaka Nagata # 252431

Utilization of Satellite Technology for Conference Servicing

The United Nations, in cooperation with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and with the Communications Satellite Corporation (COMSAT) conducted an experiment in remote simultaneous interpretation. It took place during the UN Conference on Technical Cooperation Among Developing Nations which was held in Buenos Aires from 30 August to 12 September 1978.

Studio No. 4 in New York receiving a briefing from Buenos Aires, Argentina. On the projection screen G. Oudovenko, Director of the Interpretation and Meetings Division, addresses UN Staff in New York. 31 August 1978, United Nations, New York.



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### Technical revolution at the United Nations: SI by Satellite (1978)

Right: UN photo/Saw Lwin #  
252425

Utilization of Satellite  
Technology for Conference  
Servicing

Discussion evaluating the  
results of the satellite  
experiment. In New York (from  
left to right): G. Oudovenko,  
Director, Interpretation and  
Meetings Division; Bohdan  
Lewandowski, Under-Secretary-  
General of the Department of  
Conference Services and  
George Klebnikov, Chief,  
Interpretation Service, in TV  
Studio H.

08 September 1978 United  
Nations, New York.



*alfaguera*

## The first generation

«Rabinovitch's performers are cultural split personalities, uprooted by wars, pogroms, revolutions and economic earthquakes, and somehow infused with a wanderlust that had led them to roam the earth collecting languages and reputations in an incredible number of fields. Though persons unfriendly to the division have labelled it a catchall for misfits, there is rhyme and reason to this strange occupational grab bag.»  
(*Saturday Evening Post*, August 12, 1950: 112)

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## Susanna Wieniawa

UN Headquarters, Lake  
Success, New York

29/03/1948

Simultaneous  
Interpretation

Susanna Wieniawa of the  
Interpretation Division,  
Department of Conference  
and General Services, who  
interprets from French and  
Spanish into English. UN  
photo 189118



*Susanna*

[For more information see:

**The use of photographs as historical sources, a case study**

**Early simultaneous interpreting at the United Nations.**

**Jesús Baigorri-Jalón**

This chapter presents a case study of how photographs can offer different angles of the dynamics involved in a complex observable event or series of events. As shown in previous research, photographs can only be valid historical sources if we are able to interpret them, and that requires the observer's active participation and the use of additional sources, such as written or oral records. I analyze eight United Nations (UN) official photographs as part of the founding narrative of simultaneous interpreting (SI) history. After introducing the theoretical and methodological background, I present the historical context of SI at the UN. The analysis of the photographs focuses on (1) the SI equipment, (2) the interpreters, and (3) the users of their services.

**Keywords:** photographs as historical sources, simultaneous interpreting, United Nations interpreters

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## Nadine Pokrosky

United Nations  
Headquarters, Lake  
Success, New York  
29/03/1948

Simultaneous Interpretation

Nadine Pokrosky, from the  
Interpretation Division of  
the United Nations, an  
interpreter of speeches and  
statements of delegates  
from Russian into French.

UN Photo 189117



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## UN assignments board 1957

UNHQ, NYC 01/12/1957

A unique simultaneous interpretation system is used in all major committee meetings and in all General Assembly meetings. The Security Council uses it together with the older consecutive translation system. It is this combination of electronic development and human resourcefulness that brings immediate comprehension and understanding of the multilingual discussions of world issues.

Some sixty highly skilled interpreters perform a vital service at the United Nations meetings where delegates from 82 nations come together to present their views in one of the five official languages or in their own tongues. Mr Raul Mardones, one of the interpreters, checks the Assignment Board to find out which of the meetings he will be working with during the day. Photo 189381



*alfoque*

**Basile Yakovlev**  
consecutive interpreting  
1957

UNHQ NYC 01/12/1957

Seen here taking notes during a meeting of one of the U.N. General Assembly's committees is Mr. Basile Yakovlev, one of the consecutive interpreters. The consecutive method of interpretation requires translation of the speaker's remarks after he has completed his speech. UN Photo 189382



*al-fayyaz*

**Mary Jaquith**

UNHQ NYC 09/03/1965

Mrs. Mary Jaquith, a United Nations interpreter, at work in a booth overlooking a meeting room. Some fifty highly skilled interpreters perform a vital service at United Nations meetings where delegates from 114 nations come together to present their views in one of the five official languages or in their own tongues.

UN Photo/ARA217510



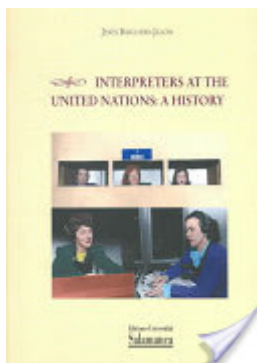
*al-fayyaz*

## From marvel to profession

«The 1974 «strike» [45 of the 75 interpreters called in sick on April 22, 1974] constitutes the milestone symbolising the move from «marvel» to «profession». This is when the interpreters told the Organisation that their conditions of «marvels» had a limit, that they ran out of circus tricks after a certain number of hours and that they needed a «safety-net» for their linguistic acrobatics and a relief team. What they were saying was that they were professionals like all the rest, i.e., like those who were not mentioned in the press. (Baigorri-Jalón 2014/2004: 111-112)

*alfoque*

[From the book Baigorri-Jalón, Jesús (2014/ 2004) *Interpreters at the United Nations. A History*. Translated by Anne Barr. Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca



Partial view:

[https://books.google.es/books/about/Interpreters\\_at\\_the\\_United\\_Nations\\_A\\_his.html?id=iB5TPUXyXioC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.es/books/about/Interpreters_at_the_United_Nations_A_his.html?id=iB5TPUXyXioC&redir_esc=y)



## **Interpreters 1987 (in-between generation)**

UNHQ NYC, 29/05/1987  
United Nations interpreters  
Carol Martinez (left) and  
Stephen Pearl, working in  
the English booth of the  
Security Council Chamber  
during the 2748th meeting  
of the Council.

UN Photo/Yutaka Nagata  
270326



*alfagura*

## **Interpreters during Security Council Meeting on Bosnia and Herzegovina**

United Nations interpreters  
provide simultaneous  
interpretation for a Security  
Council meeting during its  
consideration of the  
situation in Bosnia and  
Herzegovina.

05 December 2008

United Nations, New York  
Photo # 234062

(Marta Herrera, Spanish  
booth)



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## Modern times: sociology

...the identikit picture of the UN interpreter of the last two decades corresponds to the following characteristics, even though no single interpreter fits the picture exactly, of course. The interpreter is female. She comes from a monolingual middle-class family. She starts learning foreign languages at primary and secondary school. She improves her command of the languages she is studying by spending short periods of time in the countries where the languages are spoken. She has a very good command of her mother tongue and a good command of another two languages (a better command of one than of the other of these two). She is not a perfect bilingual. She takes a degree course at an interpreting school. She works as a freelance interpreter of translator for a time. She starts work in the UN after several years experience when she is just over thirty. (...) (Baigorri-Jalón 2014/2004: 135-136)

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## Modern times: technology

The developments in new technologies will also be present in booth situations even at conventional meetings. Tomorrow's conference interpreters will need basic computer skills. For example, in the future interpreters will be able to consult UN documents in the booth using cd-rom or some other medium and they will also be able to use on-line glossaries; interpreters will have all the material they need for a meeting in their notebook computers. (Baigorri-Jalón 2014/2004: 174)

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**Modern technology in  
Security Council  
Chamber 2016**

Right: UN photo/Loey Felipe  
# 680908

Security Council Considers  
Situation in Darfur, Sudan

A view, from an interpreters' booth, of the Security Council meeting on the situation in Darfur, Sudan, as Fatou Bensouda (shown on screen at centre), Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), briefs the Council.

09 June 2016

United Nations, New York



*al-fayez*

**Modern Technology:  
Scene at UN Headquarters  
during High-level Week of 73rd  
General Assembly**

Interpreters at work  
during the first day of  
the General

Assembly's seventy-  
third general debate.

25 September 2018

United Nations, New  
York

Photo # 777365



*al-fayez*

## External variables and quality (2017)

...a combination of speed, accent –related to the increasing dominance of English as the international organization’s lingua franca –, topics and information technologies makes up a set of elements which explain to a great extent many of the interpreters’ concerns. The current virtually round-the-clock immediate connection seems to create expectations on users of interpreting services which do not always comply with the basic tenets of communication, to the point of putting into question the meaning of concepts such as «speaker», «speech» or «listener», often leading to challenge the delicate balance of Gile’s efforts model. (Baigorri & Travieso 2017: 66)



[Full text of the article available here:

<http://revistas.usal.es/index.php/clina/article/view/clina2017325372> ]

## UN as a springboard of interpreters' professionalization

...the UN has played throughout its years of existence an important role as an institution which helped to outline the contours of the profession even before the birth of AIIC: the worksite originated the profession, as it was the case in other fields such as social work, librarianship or teaching (Abbott 1988: 80) (Baigorri & Travieso 2017: 66).

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### Summary external variables



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Thank you for your attention!

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