

Crisis and Change in Conference Interpreting

by Clare Donovan

The presentation will provide an overview of the changes in conference interpreting over the years from the 1940s to the current day and looking beyond, with a particular emphasis on technological changes – simultaneous, Internet-based tools, remote interpreting, and now AI – and their impact of professional awareness and self-perception.

The initial premise is that interpreting is a profession born out of crisis and the upheavals of the second world war, and also shaped by change.

The presentation will begin with a description of the beginnings of the professionalisation of conference interpreting with the Nuremberg trials and over the following years. During this time, conference interpreting was set apart from other forms of interpreting and anchored in the emerging international institutional framework. Simultaneous interpretation emerged as a necessary part of this framework. Simultaneous can be framed as a major factor in the process of professionalisation, in particular in the definition and transmission of professional norms and beliefs.

The introduction of online tools – Internet search engines, glossaries, document management applications – substantially changed the way interpreters handled preparation, documents, and terminology. Arguably, these tools are ideally adapted to the requirements of interpreters and have helped them cope with increasing difficulty in terms of speed, read texts and their own declining agency.

Technological change also led to the gradual introduction of various forms of remote participation and remote interpretation. This trend was already well-established, although marginal, when the Covid 19 pandemic hit. After the temporary suspension of conference life, including interpreting, there was the surprisingly rapid extension and enhancement of remote meetings in myriad forms. The impact of this on the profession as a whole will be examined. Currently, we are seeing diversification, with a partial reversion to onsite meetings, yet with a sizeable fraction held in various remote modes. This is clearly impacting the profession at many levels.

Finally, we will consider AI, the key issue of concern at the moment. AI can be seen in two forms – a set of tools to assist interpreters during preparation and in booth – or an existential threat. Both need to be considered cautiously, not as blanket truths but as possible options. AI-based tools can offer benefits but only within limits. AI driven interpreting may capture some segments of the market, but perhaps also generate new demand in others.