Chapter 12

The Interpreter as a Cultural Agent: The Cultural Role of Interpreters Over Time

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ABSTRACT

The interpreters’ cultural role has evolved significantly over time. Understanding the profession’s history is necessary to understand its cultural evolution. Prior to professionalization, history portrayed interpreters as intercultural agents who held power as essential players, working as cultural and linguistic mediators. With the advent of conference interpreting in the Nuremberg Trials, a new professional image reflected the primary role of the interpreter as a linguistic medium. Due to the more interactive communicative activities involved, dialogue interpreting reflected a broader cultural role. This chapter discusses how the cultural role of the interpreter evolved over time, and within specializations. It gives an overview of the evolution of the cultural role in historic interpreting, conference interpreting, community interpreting, and in the medical interpreting specialization.

INTRODUCTION

The view of what constitutes interpreting underlies the discussion of whether the interpreter is innately a cultural agent, or not. For the purposes of this chapter, the cultural role of the interpreter will refer to the role of the interpreter related to bridging the cultural gap between the individuals he or she interprets for. The historic view of interpreting portrays the interpreter as a link (AIIC History Group, 2013). The interpreter mediated between individuals or groups with different languages and cultural constructs. Interpreters were seen as cultural interfaces to communicate with another culture for different purposes. In contrast, the newer professional image of interpreters, formed in the 1920s, and later with the onset of the development of the first professional association for interpreters, the International Association
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of Conference Interpreters, AIIC, in 1953 (AIIC History Group, 2013) involved the complex linguistic activity of conveying messages from one language to another, simultaneously or consecutively. The cognitive skills required to interpret accurately, as well as the linguistic complexities, dominated this conduit model (Wilcox & Shaffer, 2005). However, dialogue interpreting brought about a sociological and interactional approach to the research (Wadensjö, 1998), which reintroduced the cultural role of interpreters in practice.

This chapter will discuss two different views: 1) the linguistic role or conduit model, also called the invisibility model, and 2) the cultural role of acting as an intercultural mediator of the interpreting process. How have these views affected the evolution of the profession’s cultural role? While exploring the evolution of the cultural role of interpreting over time, it will ultimately explore the characteristics of various interpreter specializations that seem to curtail or to enhance their cultural role.

BACKGROUND

The Cultural Role of the Historic Interpreter

Interpreting has probably been in existence ever since man used spoken or signed language to interact with different cultures. It has always played a vital role in relationships between people of different origins (Delisle & Woodsworth, 1995, p. 18). Throughout the centuries, the need for intercultural communication spread due to several factors.

One prevailing factor involved the friendly or unfriendly contact of tribes, peoples, and communities for trade and/or invasion. When intercultural communication needs arose, the identification and recruitment of a bicultural and bilingual individual was sought out. This individual needed to speak the other language to a certain degree. In order for that to be the case, the individual must have at some point had contact with the other culture due to personal history, experience, or heritage. This individual would be drawn into this powerful position of mediating between two cultural groups for a specific reason. S/he may or may not have had a position of power in the community before the need arose. Accepting this new role as an intermediary between two cultural groups may have increased his/her status in the community. Generally, the group that initiated the intercultural communication had an interest or a message to discuss with the other group. This individual would be selected to represent the objectives of one group and to help achieve certain goals (Steward, Schein & Cartwright, 1998).

Until the 20th century, travel opportunities were not as prevalent. It is perhaps noteworthy to mention that these individuals, acting as interpreters, were not easy to find. Speaking foreign tongues was historically seen as a privileged skillset enjoyed by those who had the opportunity to visit and experience different cultural groups. This means that they were also probably not easily replaceable. These individuals did not simply aid in daily communications, but were called for specific purposes between different group leaders. By representing individuals who were key figures in enabling mutual agreements related to trade, religion, or other issues, they themselves became key figures to a lesser extent. As official messengers, these intermediaries needed to be trusted by the hiring party to act in their best interests (Angelelli, 2004, p. 24). Both parties were obliged to rely on what these intermediaries stated. They were forced to trust the interpretation of a message from one language into another without the possibility to ascertain its accuracy. Were they able to interpret every message accurately from one party to the other? Regardless of their linguistic ability to interpret accurately, were they given permission to
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