RECOLLECTIONS OF A CONFERENCE INTERPRETER: A BRIEF ENCOUNTER WITH THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

M. Helena A. G. Anacleto

Although I believe that a theoretical discussion on consecutive and simultaneous interpretation is as valuable as any academic problematical exchange of ideas can be, it is not the purpose of this article. I agree that it is necessary to reach a definition of consecutive and simultaneous interpretation if we are to understand the language used in this essay. By "consecutive", it is indisputably accepted by the majority of theorists that we understand that there is a speaker who delivers a speech during, let us set as an example, three to ten minutes, and immediately after an interruption, the interpreter will render the same speech in the target language; in "simultaneous interpretation", there are two speakers: speaker one is delivering a speech which is only understandable to another speaker – the interpreter – who is addressing a much wider audience by means of a microphone in a booth and headphones worn by the listeners of speaker one. It is more frequent in simultaneous than in consecutive interpretation that the interpreter is a native speaker of the target language.

Anyone who has performed consecutive and simultaneous interpretation will agree on how harder simultaneous interpretation can get if the target language we are using is not our own. On the other hand, consecutive interpretation may offer another kind of problems: memory and note taking are essential skills for a good interpreter. But a good interpreter will encounter with problems if s/he is not proficient enough in the source language as well. It is very disputed whether an ideal interpreter should (not) be bilingual, if we are to theoretically accept the concept of bilingualism as bi- or multiculturalism. There are radicals who will claim that bilingualism cannot "survive" in a bicultural individual, because one language (and that is to say, one culture) will always be predominant over the other; this view I dismiss as a too rigid one.

On the other hand, there are two groups of partisans: the ones who defend that being bilingual is an enormous advantage for consecutive and simultaneous interpretation, and the ones who claim that it is safer to be a native speaker of one language and have a strong knowledge of the languages in

our language combination whose number can vary from generally one to three or more. At least in the case of Europe and at a high level of performance, it is rare that the interpreter master more than four foreign languages and can proficiently develop a career with a wider combination of five languages, that is, her/his mother tongue and four other languages. But why not call it "consecutive and simultaneous translation" rather than "interpretation"? I contend that the mental process of the act in itself can be called "translation", for it is a transposition into another language. However, the way in which it is delivered is oral, and therefore only susceptible of being called "interpretation". Another aspect that supports my contention is that there is not only a *translation*, that is a *transposition* of one language into another; there is also interpretation, and that is why it should be called "consecutive and simultaneous interpretation" rather than "translation". Nothing that I have been affirming is new, and both views can be further studied in the specific literature.

My point of view is not one from a sophisticated theoretician or from an experienced conference interpreter: my experience in the theoretical field is reduced to a post-graduate course in German and Portuguese translation at Oporto University supported by the Social European Fund, to the intensive training course in Geneva University in 1989 and to my more or less random – more than I like to admit and confess – personal research as a teacher of Translation at Oporto Polytechnic Institute; my point of view does not come from a very rich conference interpreter career either – my experience in the practical field is too brief to be called "a career". But I served as a conference interpreter of the Portuguese booth at the European Parliament in Brussels, Luxemburg and Strasburg, shortly after the European elections of 1989 occurred in all the countries of the Union.

Arriving in the chocolate land was not easy. I had never been stopped at a frontier, but all the clandestine immigration of young Portuguese women, seeking to work in Geneva's hotels, made the Swiss authorities suspicious – after all, all I had with me was a letter of acceptance from the European Parliament, in Portuguese, and besides I had no plane ticket to return to Oporto for I did not know whether I would pass the final exam in Geneva – and then depart to Brussels – or if I would fail the exam, in which case I would

return to Portugal. After a phone call to the *École de Traduction et Interprétation* in Geneva, I was liberated to enter the cuckoo-clock's land.

There I met my three other Portuguese colleagues, who were all older than me. I have changed all the names of the people I am telling the story of to protect their privacy, but the events I am telling about are accurate: Ana had been a university teacher of Portuguese in Germany for ages, Rosa was doing her doctorate at the Sorbonne, and Gil was an engineer who had been working as a musician in Italy for years. Their strongest foreign language was German, French and Italian, respectively, and mine was English. We immediately started hunting for a place to live, and that proved to be a difficult task: on one hand, the regular school semester had already started, and all the *Foyers* were full; on the other hand, it was difficult to find a flat, considering we four were foreigners and were planning to stay for only six months at the most. After many walks in the cold streets of Geneva, which gave us the idea of many *Quartiers* in the city, we finally found places to live in: Ana and Rosa would share quarters at the house of one of the school Director's old friends, and I and Gil would be living at the Plainpalais, at St. Boniface, the Catholic Centre of the German community in Geneva. I am sure that my insistence in speaking German at the desk proved to be helpful, when we came to the final agreement.

We immediately started classes, even before finding a place to live – we had a very limited time for the training, and the money of the European tax payers was not to be wasted…

I was finally at the ÉTI, one of the best schools for translation and interpretation in the whole world…The opportunity to get there seemed now to have been very easy: I had just completed my studies in Modern Languages and Literatures (English and German Studies), in June 1988, when I saw a note on the wall at Oporto University. Apparently, the European Parliament was looking for candidates to become conference interpreters to work in the Portuguese booth. It is necessary to remind people that Portugal had recently joined the EEC (European Economic Community), in 1986, soon to be called "European Union", and that they were apparently still short of staff. They were looking for young graduates to fill the positions in their ranks of freelance interpreters. The note said they would pay the trip to Luxemburg for the interview to become a candidate to interpret at the European Parliament (EP) if the résumé met their expectations. As I had nothing to lose, I decided to apply,

and, shortly after, I had my plane ticket to go for the interview at the Plateau de Kirchberg, where the headquarters of the EP still are. I had a terrible flight (it snowed, it was rainy and windy – a typical winter in Luxemburg…), but in the next morning, there I was, ready for the interview. I was informed that, depending on how good – or bad… – I was, I would (not) pass to the following stages of the interview. I never thought I would be a candidate to attend the intensive training course in Geneva University, and all I wished at that time was to "get through all the exams at the interview"…

We started with Flemish, and as I had only studied the language for two years, I did not do well. The next exam, in German, went much better; we covered English and the work language was French. First we had a conversation in French, then I was tested on sight translating, consecutive interpreting and, finally, simultaneous interpretation from German into Portuguese. The exams were just to evaluate if the candidates had the potential to be trained as conference interpreters. The jury not only analysed the candidates according to their linguistic proficiency level, but also the candidate's profile – I knew that the profession was a very stressful one, but I did not get nervous at the interview; on the contrary, I was excited to pass from one stage of the exam to the other. In one word, I apparently did well, for I was chosen to go to ÉTI, in Switzerland, in the following month of February.

As I pointed out before, me and my other three Portuguese colleagues immediately started classes. The human resources at the ÉTI were of an incredible quality. Most of the teachers had been or were working as interpreters at that time – the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva was their main employer. As freelances or as staff members, the teachers worked with us with very up-to-date materials, usually conferences they had recently had to interpret. The Portuguese candidates were divided into two groups: Rosa and Gil had in their language combination French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese; Ana and I had French, English, German and Portuguese. In the first classes we were told that we made a good team, because each of us was a specialist in one language and, therefore, became complementary to the others. We were told by one of the teachers: *On arrivera a faire de vous des interprètes, même de bons interprètes*. This made us very proud and gave us confidence.

On the other hand, we were quite "uncommon" students at the École de Traduction et Intérpretation: most of our fellow students were Swiss, of a

foreign descent or from another region in Switzerland, they were taking the degree in interpretation after having studied translation there, and they had one year and a half before submitting themselves to the first attempt to pass their exams. We were "full blooded Portuguese", we were "greenhorns" in the country, had five months to train until our only attempt to get to the European Parliament, and also had a handicap: there were no teachers there who could speak Portuguese. This made us more responsible for hearing eachothers' work by recording our voices in the booths and listening later to eachothers' interpretations. The contact with the other students was really very enriching because they all had different *Weltanschauungen* from ours, because they came from different cultures and had different backgrounds from ours. I will never forget the discussions we had about the Women's situation in Islam compared to the situation in Portugal with an Arabic student who was the daughter of a diplomat and a fellow student at ÉTI, as I will never forget the conversations we had with a Swiss-German who claimed that being among a minority in Geneva had made him aware of the problems of the Swiss democracy.

ÉTI had resources that were completely new to me: the diversity and enormous quantity of specialized dictionaries at the school library really impressed me. Also, the school's specialized glossaries and lexica were impressive to a student who had normally been used to working with very scarce resources. There was also an enormous quantity of recorded cassettes with speeches about different issues, which we used for training during the times we had no classes.

There was not much free time at the end of a six working days' week, but when I had the time, I never missed conferences advertised in the local University paper – it enlarged the vocabulary I might lack in specific areas, it being atomic energy, international law or something else. Also the city was full of opportunities: I will never forget an African ball I went to with an African diplomat in training from the United Nations, at the Carrouge quarter. The Leman lake, with its famous geyser, also meant a wonderful opportunity to relax on its borders. I went very often for long walks by the lake alone or with friends. Once, I walked for so long that I made a serious blister on my ankle; the next day I was the school's joke, when everybody asked me if I had had a ski accident over the weekend… There were also the wonderful music concerts at the *Conservatoire*, very near the Plainpalais, where I lived. They were either

exams taken by the music students of the University or real performances by musicians. They were music to eager ears such as mine at that time.

Life at the *Foyer* was varied and stimulating. The inhabitants varied from refugees, who had to look for inexpensive living, to officers of the UN, who were afraid of living too lonely in an apartment, or young Swiss students and workers from out of Geneva. We frequently had international dinner parties, where the inhabitants of the *Foyer* mixed in an incredible harmony. Different nationalities, different careers were no barriers for a healthy friendship among us and with the friends some would bring home. That is how I met diverse characters such as refugees from Iran, who would claim they came from "Persia", or students from the CERN, the European centre for atomic research, or even future diplomats, who studied at the International Relations University, and actual officers from the United Nations.

During the time I spent in Switzerland, Easter came, and, with it, a few free days. Ana decided to spend the holidays in Austria, Rosa went back to her home in Paris and Gil decided to visit his friends in Italy. I was the one whose choice was quite limited; too far from Portugal to even think to go back, I decided to visit the country, since I was there, anyway. I bought a *demi tarif* train ticket, and there I went. It was not the first time I was travelling by train abroad by myself, I had already done that when I was a hotel kitchen helper in Germany, and Switzerland, I thought, could not be that different. In fact, my financial resources were scarce, I had little money, because I was on a scholarship and had no time for extra part-time jobs, but I survived. I toured all of the Swiss cantons, eating and sleeping at youth hostels or at cheap homes belonging to the Church or to other charitable institutions. I did that for ten or twelve days and then returned to Geneva. My parents and one of my sisters visited me from Good Friday until Easter Sunday, and I, very proudly, showed them my favourite spots of the city: where we could eat the best Italian pizza with a good *Chianti*, or visit a museum with the best Egyptian collection, or even have a little chat with some Portuguese at a local *Café*. After all, Geneva is called "the Portuguese canton of Switzerland" by the over twenty-five thousand Portuguese who reside there – and these were just the official numbers; there are many more who are not officially counted.

At the same time, classes continued. I had classes with the other ÉTI students – the main difference was that they would get comments from the

teachers, whereas the Portuguese had to listen to themselves by themselves, for the teachers did not speak our language. I learned quite a lot about different schools of thought: ÉTI and Paris on one hand and the Moscow school on the other hand – may I call the attention to the fact that the Berlin Wall still existed and *Perestroika* was starting to appear in the former Soviet Union. So, rather than cooperating with the Moscow school, we learned about the difference that notes for the consecutive interpretation could bring, for instance: while in Moscow the future interpreters were encouraged to work as a team, sharing the same symbols for the consecutive, in Paris or Geneva we were prepared to develop our own personal system, to get ready for a competitive work market.

That was an extremely profitable period of time, when I learned about international institutions, when I became less of a "literature freak" and even more interested in politics, economics and other areas of human sciences and general knowledge. After all, a good interpreter has to know something of every area and has to know everything in some areas.

As we had no Portuguese teachers, the head of the Portuguese booth at the European Parliament would often visit us to evaluate our progress. We also had a University teacher of Portuguese coming to evaluate our level of Portuguese language, and after a certain period, we had regular whole Saturday morning classes with an EP French interpreter, whose language combination included Portuguese. These proved to be the most extenuating but useful classes. Finally, we had someone who could evaluate our performance in Portuguese both in sight interpretation and consecutive, as well as in simultaneous interpretation. Also, as this interpreter was already working at the Parliament, he taught us some tricks of the trade. He gave us numerous tips, which proved to be really helpful later on, when we were already in Brussels, Luxemburg and Strasburg.

Finally the day of the exam that would determine whether we would become *stagiaires* at the European Parliament or return to Portugal arrived. There were interpreters from several booths in the jury, as well as the Director of the school and the Head of the Portuguese booth. Fortunately, we all did well, and we were given one day to pack and leave for Brussels. We had a farewell dinner party with all our teachers from the ÉTI, and there we went, with our luggage full of glossaries we believed would be very helpful in our new profession.

When we arrived in Brussels, it all started again: finding a place to live was a priority. Ana decided to stay in a hotel, Rosa stayed with an interpreter at the European Commission she already knew from the time she had been a *stagiaire* at the Commission, Gil and I stayed with interpreters at the Parliament.

New buildings were being built in Brussels for the Members of Parliament and for the officers. At the Headquarters, there was a Belgian Bank with a Portuguese gentleman, whose name was something like José Silva, and who was the kindest person to us, the new Portuguese *stagiaires*. There was an effervescent atmosphere in the Parliament corridors: there had just been MP elections in the European Union, and the British Labour Party had had a considerable success. That is why English could be heard in a much more enthusiastic way than the phlegmatic British usually spoke, as some fellow interpreters from the Portuguese booth would point out to us. That was the time also when the Members of the Parliament would join to build the "European families" (the term "parties" was not, and still is not used). That was the time when new families emerged from the unknown. For instance, the so called "Greens" gained a new expression in the Parliament at that time, and we disputed the opportunity to interpret their meetings, because they had a less conventional way of speaking there. We were, as the MPs, new in the Parliament, and that was the time to build friendships in the teams at the booths.

The Portuguese booth had never more than one *stagiaire* at a time, and there were at least four interpreters for each meeting. One would interpret the President of the meeting, and the others would take turns to interpret the successive speakers. It was a time to learn a lot about the ways politics at the Parliament went. We four colleagues of Geneva soon became well integrated in the teams, and sometimes we hardly had the time to exchange experiences, because we had a very intensive schedule. The Head of the Portuguese booth wanted us to be exposed to as many meetings as possible to make us gain experience. We would have another exam soon to determine whether we would pass from *stagiaires* to a full contract as trained conference interpreters with the EP. We learned a lot about the jargon such as the *pivot* system, for instance: every morning we would go to the schedule and see who was the *pivot* for the meeting we were going to interpret. A "pivot" is an interpreter who has a very strong knowledge of a "rare" language, let us say, for instance, Danish. The

pivot will interpret Danish into a more "common" language, let us say, for instance, French, and all the interpreters who cannot interpret from Danish will interpret from the *pivot's* French instead of from the original Danish. Another example of jargon is *to make a "relais,"* which means to interpret not directly from the speaker in the room, but from a booth from another language. This is used for purposes of work convenience.

We also had to go through the conference interpretation experience in Luxemburg. At that time, the European Commission frequently asked the Parliament to "lend" its interpreters in mission for the meetings at Luxemburg. I went with Gil, who had a different language combination from mine, and Ana and Rosa went together too, but at different times from ours. The interpretation experience there was very productive: the vocabulary was even much more specific, because details were discussed at the Commission that not even the MPs used in their meetings. I stayed there for just one week, but I enjoyed the work itself even better than in Brussels – although the social environment was more provincial than the Belgian capital's was.

And finally the Plenary session in Strasburg came. I celebrated my 23rd birthday aboard the train from Brussels to Strasburg, and the least I can say is that it was a *different* birthday. My colleagues from Geneva and from the European Parliament and I had a birthday dinner party at a restaurant on a warm July evening by the Strasburg cathedral.

The building where the Plenary session takes place belongs to the Council of Europe. We had been looking forward to the session with eagerness. We had been told at our training in Geneva that the Plenary "was only for experienced interpreters". The point is that the speakers have a very tight time limit to speak at the Plenary, therefore they speak at an incredible speed to make the most of the time they have, not worrying too much about how they speak, because what counts is what ends up in the Plenary's minutes. We saw the Plenary session as a challenge – we wanted to check whether we were already capable of interpreting the MPs under those circumstances. For that we used the dumb booth, in the jargon called the "Turkish" booth (for the negotiations for that country to enter the European Union were at their early stages). We knew we were not heard by anyone, but it was fantastic training in terms of speech speed.

That was the time when I had the confirmation that I had been offered another scholarship – this time to study for a year in the United States – to pursue a post graduation at Smith College, in the state of Massachusetts. It was an offer I could not refuse. Besides, the Head of the Portuguese booth assured me that the doors would still be open at the EP, should I decide to come back to Europe. This scholarship was decisive for my future career at academia. After having finished my Diploma in American Studies in the United States, I became an English language teacher at Minho University in Braga, and later I became an Assistant at Oporto Polytechnic Institute – my experience from Geneva, Brussels, Luxemburg and Strasburg became an inspiration for my teaching of translation at the Institute and a good source of encouragement for research in interpretation.