

Gaiba, Francesca (1998): *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation. The Nuremberg Trial*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press

Jesús Baigorri-Jalón

Volume 44, numéro 3, septembre 1999

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/001948ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/001948ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (imprimé)

1492-1421 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Baigorri-Jalón, J. (1999). Gaiba, Francesca (1998): *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation. The Nuremberg Trial*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press. *Meta*, 44 (3), 511-514. <https://doi.org/10.7202/001948ar>

juvenile salmon
(Salmonid Farming – Growth and Nutrition)

A young salmon which has passed the Stage but has not reached the adult stage.

See also **parr, smolt, grilse**

saumoneau n. m.
(Salmoniculture – Croissance et nutrition)

Jeune saumon ayant dépassé le stade d'alevin mais n'ayant pas atteint le stade adulte.

Voir aussi **tacon, smolt, madelaineau**

André Clas
*Université de Montréal,
 Montréal, Canada*

Gaiba, Francesca (1998): *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation. The Nuremberg Trial*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press.

Francesca Gaiba has published her first book, which is devoted to the origins of simultaneous interpretation at the Nuremberg trial, thus filling one of the most important lacunae in the huge black hole of conference interpretation history. Its importance stems from the revolutionary consequences that the new modality had for the profession. Today it is widely admitted that a clear distinction must be made among four different modalities of interpretation, depending on the format of the meetings in which it takes place: community, escort, tribunal and conference interpretation. Although the Nuremberg trial obviously took place in a criminal court, it could be considered an example of conference interpreting, because it was an international and multilingual gathering with an audience that went beyond the usual participants in courts. The Nuremberg trial was meant to be an event to be publicized and to have a global deterrent effect for the future. The effect of publicity was indeed achieved, with the presence in the court of a press corps equivalent, *mutatis mutandis*, to the current CNN coverage of headline news (*the eyes of the world were pointed on the crowded Nuremberg courtroom*, p. 59). Unfortunately, the deterrent effect was not equally successful, and genocide and crimes against humanity have been—indeed, are being—committed many years after the Nuremberg sentences were pronounced. That explains the need felt by the international community to create international criminal courts, such as those for ex-Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and the one recently established in Rome of a more permanent, universal nature. In this sense, Gaiba's book may serve as another timely reminder to refresh some forgetful minds.

Simultaneous interpretation had existed for some time before there was any large scale demand for it. As happens with revolutions in general, and with technical and scientific revolutions in particular, the conditions of change had been created before their full-scale adoption. The cumbersome procedures of consecutive conference interpretation—which was born at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference—spurred the restless mind of the Bostonian entrepreneur, Filene, at least as early as 1924 when he started sponsoring simultaneous interpretation experiments at international gatherings. These tests had a certain measure of success, especially at the International Labor Conferences, where, unlike meetings of the League of Nations which were officially bilingual and attended only by diplomats or Government officials, the linguistic barrier posed an acute problem of communication. Indeed, some of the participants at the I.L.O. conferences came from social backgrounds where knowledge of languages other than the mother tongue was rare.

In the first part of the first chapter of her book, which, as Gaiba says, *offers a complete overview of the birth of simultaneous interpretation* (p. 19), she describes briefly previous attempts to introduce simultaneous interpretation, quoting indirect sources which are not always totally accurate. For instance, *real* simultaneous interpretation, as opposed to *simultaneous successive interpretation*, had actually been used during entire official meetings of I.L.O. conferences in the late 1920s, and for more languages than the four used in Nuremberg.

The main part of the chapter deals with the preparatory arrangements for the use of simultaneous interpretation in the trial, both those of a technical nature and, in particular, the arrangements relating to human resources, specifically the selection, recruitment and training of interpreters, which are described in great detail. Gaiba conveys quite clearly the time pressure under which preparations had to be made in order to meet the deadline agreed to by the major Allied powers, i.e., Great Britain, the U.S.S.R., the U.S.A. and France.

The second chapter is devoted to a detailed description of the simultaneous interpretation system used in Nuremberg. This information is necessary in order to reach the wide audience to whom the book is addressed, that is, *not only to professional interpreters* (p. 15). However, I must say that the information is also useful for interpreters, because our current professional and technical conditions differ considerably from those tested at Nuremberg. Gaiba presents a clear picture of the electrical equipment, of the wires and the microphones utilized in the courtroom, which provided not only for communication in different languages, but also for the recording of both the original and the interpreted versions of the proceedings. Gaiba succeeds in her attempt to draw the reader nearer to the process followed by these pioneers who, playing it by ear, designed the system of lights that could regulate the speed of the speakers (yellow to slow down and red to stop completely the proceedings), arranged the schedule to distribute interpreters in three teams, and established the post of monitor to coordinate and supervise the many aspects involved in the actual interpretation.

In the third chapter, Gaiba deals with one of the main aspects that prompted her study: to determine *whether the use of untrained interpreters had an impact on the fairness of the trial* (p. 20). In this context, she describes the different safety nets (stenographic records, electrical recordings of the proceedings and final revised versions of printed records) used in the tribunal to avoid any misinterpretation that could jeopardize the defendants' fair treatment. The second part of this chapter is devoted precisely to the impact of interpretation on the procedural aspects of the trial and to an assessment of the quality of interpretation by some of the users. Gaiba's observations about the specific difficulties posed to interpreters by the German language and her comments on how Göring took advantage of his *right* to interpretation, thanks to his understanding of the English language, are particularly interesting from the linguistic standpoint.

The situation of interpreters in terms of pay and social life outside the court are the subject of the next brief chapter (*Life outside the courtroom*). Interpreters' salaries were curiously different, depending on the recruiting country (for example, the U.S. paid more generously than France) and on other circumstances, such as the correlation with U.S. civil service scales. The reference to their social life gives the reader an idea of the atmosphere that prevailed in the almost completely destroyed city of

Nuremberg, as well as of relations among interpreters inside and outside the court. In this context, Gaiba notes the emerging pre-cold war barrier that divided the Western *pool* of interpreters from their Soviet counterparts.

Chapter five consists of a brief biographical profile of some of the Nuremberg trial interpreters. It is a valuable contribution, both as an interesting source of information and as a well-deserved tribute to those anonymous voices. Without them the trial could not have been conducted in the expeditious manner required for justice to be done and for exemplary universal jurisprudence to be established.

Finally, there are two brief chapters, which could perhaps have been merged into one. They are entitled respectively *Conclusion*, an evaluation by some of the interpreters of their experience at Nuremberg, and *Epilogue*, where Gaiba outlines the evolution of simultaneous interpretation after the trial. For reference, the book ends with a useful appendix which contains a list of court members and the sentences of each of the defendants, and a well-structured and comprehensive bibliography. Within the text of the book, the reader can find some original photographs of the trial relevant to interpretation. In some of them (for example, the one on page 76) I miss having the names of the interpreters, which the author could have identified with the help of her oral sources.

As Gaiba says in her introduction *the main strength of this book is the amount of information it provides and the novelty of such a text among the literature of this field* (p. 20). The author does not mislead the reader when she explicitly says that her book *is not argumentative but descriptive* (p. 20), but I believe that she could perhaps have reached a somewhat higher level of generalization with the ingredients available.

For example, she could perhaps have reflected a little more on the fact that the criteria used for the selection of interpreters were purely intuitive and far from rigorous. She could have said a few words about the overwhelming majority of candidates who were excluded, especially since Gaiba is a trained interpreter herself. For instance, she says that the selection criteria *were very strict* (p. 40), but at the same time *there were no established criteria according to which the candidates could be judged* (p. 46). Gaiba makes clear that the people in charge of the selection process had very little time to recruit candidates. In fact, as one of the monitors puts it, *the system of simultaneous was crafted by trial and error* (Uiberall, *Foreword*, p. 11). And errors were made, because not all those who interpreted in Nuremberg were necessarily up to the task or felt comfortable with the job. Indeed, some had to be replaced, and very few of them remained in the profession after the trial. Perhaps—and this is my point—many of those excluded could have performed satisfactorily if they had been given the chance, that is, if the selection process had been better. Dostert—the Head of the Translation Division and Chief Interpreter in Nuremberg—and his assistants deserve credit for their vision, but that does not mean that they were necessarily well-equipped to decide on the selection of candidates. In fact, what they knew about simultaneous interpretation was, at best, very little more than the candidates they were judging. I wonder, for example, how many of the staff interpreters who currently meet professional expectations in international organizations would have been excluded if they had been selected with the vague criteria employed by Dostert.

Since interpreters and monitors learned *sur le tas*, Nuremberg played the role of interpreters' training school, and this should be highlighted. But it was indeed a very special one, where entry-level students were more often than not catapulted into the

booths to perform as professional interpreters through a hardly adequate sink-or-swim approach.

In sociological terms, I miss a certain level of generalization as regards the historical events that bred the polyglot skills of most Nuremberg interpreters. For instance, there was the paradoxical situation of some interpreters, such as Wolfe Frank or Peter Uiberall, who to a certain extent had been the victims of the defendants for whom they were translating, but who owed their linguistic skills precisely to the racist policies of the Nazi criminals who forced them out of their countries.

Not just Nazism but also other events of this century were decisive in creating the supply and demand for interpretation services. Dostert himself might have been a purely monolingual Frenchman if, when he was a boy, his local village near Verdun had not been invaded by the Germans and liberated by the Americans during the First World War. By the way, no explanation is given for the apparent contradiction between the assertion that Dostert could not speak German (p. 43) and the fact that he was an interpreter for the German army during the First World War (p. 133). Other interpreters, such as Khlebnikov and Heyward, would have probably been less multilingual if the Soviet revolution had not taken place shortly before they were born.

In terms of the demand, without the two world wars no international peace treaties or war crimes tribunals would have been necessary and no interpretation services would have been required for them. Or, from another perspective, if the results of the wars had been different the languages and the interpreters would also have been different.

In conclusion, Gaiba's book is an important contribution to the history of conference interpretation, which has yet to be written. The author has used original sources, both written (from various archives) and oral. The latter component is particularly important for obvious reasons. Interpreters and monitors who worked in Nuremberg and who are still alive are now in their late 70s or in their 80s. It was vital, then, to register their *voices from the past* while they were still able to recount their experiences. In this sense, Gaiba's work—surely an abbreviated version of a larger collection of material—constitutes an invaluable reference for research on that period of history.

Jesús Baigorri-Jalón
University of Salamanca,
Salamanca, Spain

Fawcett, Peter (1997): *Translation and Language. Linguistic Theories Explained*, coll. «Translation Theories Explained», Manchester (UK), St. Jerome Publishing, 160 p.

Qu'est-ce que la linguistique peut apporter aux théoriciens de la traduction? Voilà la question à laquelle Peter Fawcett se propose de répondre dans *Translation and Language. Linguistic Theories Explained*. L'ouvrage s'attaque de front à un thème délicat, la relation houleuse qui existe et persiste entre la linguistique et la traduction, relation dépeinte de façon congruente par l'auteur dès la première phrase de l'avant-