

Conference interpreting in Australia

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Introduction

Australia is renowned in the world of interpreting studies for its strong imprint on the field of community/liaison interpreting in training, as well as in education, and research. This has been widely researched and documented and finds its justification in the multicultural language policies implemented in the country since the 1970s, which rely very much on interpreting provision to facilitate equal access to services to all communities (Gentile et al. 1996; Hale 2007; Hlavac et al. 2018; Pöchhacker 1999), as well as in the provisions made under the Australian Disability Discrimination Act (1992) for deaf people to access services through Auslan (Australian Sign Language) interpreters (Napier & Kidd 2013).

Conference interpreting, on the contrary, has attracted much less attention from researchers and observers. Very little has been documented about the conference interpreting sector Down Under, even though conference interpreters have been in demand since 1947, when the first conference with interpretation was recorded (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 35), during government's bilateral or multilateral meetings, or at the international meetings and conferences hosted in the country every year. The absence of correlation and commonalities between the field of conference interpreting (generally international and private) and the development and provision of interpreting services for local, community and public needs appears to be one of the main reasons for such a dearth of information (Gile 2006; Ozolins 1998).

This chapter aims at presenting the status of conference interpreting today, despite the scarcity of data on the topic. First, by considering it through the history lens, thanks to archives and testimonies from key actors in the sector. Second, by overviewing Australian language policies and in particular the work done by NAATI, the National Accreditation Authority for T&I, since 1977, in various areas of interpreting, and particularly in conference interpreting. Then, by reviewing the evolution of conference interpreter training in the country and the various academic programmes that currently train conference interpreters. Finally, by collating data from the main providers of conference interpreting services and equipment in an attempt to map out the current market trends.

Conference interpreting Down Under: historical highlights, developments, and key figures

The birth of conference interpreting in Australia

Taylor-Bouladon (2007: 35) reports that the very first conference with interpretation on records in Australia was the South Seas Commission Conference, held in Canberra in January/February 1947. It was the fruit of an Australian initiative and led to the Canberra Agreement, the creation of a new regional international commission, the South Pacific Commission. At the conference, “interpretation would be of key importance since the constitution of such a body ... was likely to be vigorously debated” (Kerr 1988: 96). The official languages of the meeting were French and English, and interpretation was provided, consecutively and simultaneously (*chuchotage*), by three interpreters working in three different committees. Anne Robson (who became Lady Kerr when she married Sir John Kerr, Governor General of Australia from 1974 to 1977) was one of them and reported the following about the working conditions:

John Quinn, Derek Scales and I worked in separate committees. When a delegate spoke in French, the interpreter reproduced the speech in English after it ended. While English was the language of the floor we simultaneously recounted to our delegates ... the whole of what was being said. In the large meetings of today this would be done from a booth with the use of electronic equipment, but at the time one sat beside the delegate ... and murmured the words in his ear. This meant we were interpreting without pause all speeches in both languages, every moment of every session, for ten days. Such an arrangement would be unthinkable now – at least two and possibly four interpreters would be used.

(Kerr 1988: 100)

The South Pacific Commission (SPC) was founded at the meeting by the six participating governments that then administered territories in the Pacific Islands region: Australia, France, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, to restore stability to a region that had experienced the turbulence of the Second World War. Its purpose was “to assist in administering their dependent territories and to benefit the people of the Pacific” (SPC 2019). English and French were chosen as the official languages of the Commission and interpretation was always provided at its subsequent meetings.

The following interpreted meeting of importance in Australia was the fourth session of ECAFE (Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East), a United Nations meeting, held near Sydney in November 1948 (Kerr 1988; Taylor-Bouladon 2007). As reported by Kerr (1988: 140), three interpreters (two experienced ECAFE staff interpreters who then recruited Anne Robson) provided consecutive-only interpretation in English, French and Russian. Following this meeting, Anne Robson was regularly invited to interpret in the Asia-Pacific region alongside renowned colleagues from the UN and, later, AIIC members (Kerr 1988).

Over the following decade, various international meetings and conferences requiring interpretation were held in Australia and the region (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 35). One meeting of importance for the conference interpreting profession in Australia, and the working conditions of interpreters, was the 1961 Antarctic Treaty Consultative Committee meeting, held in Canberra. Anne Robson was invited to join the large team of interpreters put together for the occasion by one of the founders of AIIC. The fact she was contracted directly by the

Australian Department of External Affairs at a “customary slender fee” and was being paid “at a rate far below that of all other team members” (Kerr 1988: 228) raised concerns among AIIC colleagues, and could actually hinder the process of her membership of the international association. She complained to the Department, in vain, and informed them that from then it was her firm intention to work according to AIIC rules (see Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21, in this volume). As a result, the Department did not offer her any contracts for the following 18 months. As she explains in her memoirs, “the attitude which persisted for a long time in Australia [was] that a conference interpreter was roughly comparable in value with a guide in the streets of Marseilles” (Kerr 1988: 226). Things changed slightly at the Department with the appointment of a conference officer. Soon after, Anne Robson was contracted again as an interpreter and, from 1965 as consultant interpreter, tasked with the composition of interpreting teams during international meetings held in Australia.

Key figures

Anne Robson was the “only professional conference interpreter in Australia” (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 35) after the Second World War, and the first internationally recognised as such (Kerr 1988: 230). In discussing the “geographic dispersion” of interpreters in the 1950s and 1960s in its recent publication on the history of the association, the AIIC history group notes (2019: 54):

In some countries, a number of remarkable women were responsible for introducing conference interpreting and played an important role in extending membership of AIIC ... In the vast country of Australia, Anne Robson was for many years the only member of AIIC.

She gained AIIC membership in 1966, remained the only member until 1977, was AIIC regional secretary for the Far East and South Pacific and, as mentioned earlier, “it is thanks to her that international standards were implanted in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, with the help of Geneviève Barrau, also working free-lance at that time” (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 35). Geneviève Barrau was one of the few other conference interpreters who came to the region in the mid-1950s. She later became Chief of the SPC Linguistic Division. Both left Australia in the mid-1970s.

Valerie Taylor-Bouladon has also played an important role for the status of conference interpreting in Australia. As recounted in her book *Conference Interpreting, Principles and Practice*, she came to Australia in 1978 as an AIIC member, was domiciled six months of the year in Canberra, six months in Geneva, and worked over the years at raising professionalism and standards. Soon after her arrival, she undertook to find potential conference interpreters in the country and the region and, whenever possible, to recruit mixed teams of local and overseas interpreters. The main justification for this strategy was that “teams were still being brought in from Europe for all top-level international conferences” (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 38), and that it was in the interest of “Australian would-be interpreters, [and] of conference organizers who could save large sums of money by using local interpreters” (2007: 39). The main hurdle to this endeavour was the small number of experienced and trained local ones.

Taylor-Bouladon was elected to the AIIC Council in 1985, representing the Asia-Pacific region. For three decades, she organised teams of interpreters for various international meetings held in the region and in Australia (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 40–43), always having to deal with “the shortage of interpreters with the required language combinations” by bringing in

interpreters from overseas. As she noted regarding the lack of work and training opportunities in conference interpreting at the time:

It is rather a chicken-and-egg situation because clearly there is not enough conference work here to provide a livelihood for free-lance interpreters ... perhaps if there were more professional qualified conference interpreters of the right standard and with the missing language combinations available ... there might be more conferences.

(2007: 43)

As far as training is concerned, the situation has changed since she made these comments. As for work opportunities, they vary from year to year and language to language, as will be discussed later.

The place of conference interpreting in the multicultural language policies of Australia

Australia is a country of immigration, “one of the nations of the New World that ... attracted millions of migrants to new lands where they would be able to become the builders of new societies” (Ozolins 1998: 8). The cultural and linguistic diversity that such an identity implies is why the country developed a national multicultural policy recognising the importance of T&I services as early as the mid-1970s, a “policy of multiculturalism based on the desire for social cohesion and for integration of diverse groups of people in the Australian populace” (Hlavac et al. 2018: 2). Among the political endeavours and realisations catering for the needs of the different ethnic and linguistic groups and ensuring equal access to services for all, it is worth noting the establishment of the first telephone interpreter service in the world in 1973, of various federal grants for T&I services in hospitals from 1974, of the first full-time courses in T&I from 1975, and the creation of NAATI, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters in 1977 (Hale 2007; Hlavac et al. 2018; Ozolins 1998).

NAATI was established “with responsibility for testing and accrediting candidates, approving tertiary courses in T&I, and maintaining a register of accredited practitioners” (Hlavac et al. 2018: 11). From its inception, NAATI set up a national system of accreditation levels. The first model had five levels. For interpreting, accreditation at Levels 1, 2 and 3 catered for various public communication needs in the community, at local level. Levels 4 and 5 were the highest levels and responded mostly to requirements at international meetings. “NAATI wanted to clearly delineate conference interpreting by making Level 4 the advanced level of interpreting which it defined as conference interpreting” (Ozolins 1998: 38). Accreditation at this level could be gained, theoretically, by passing a test or completing a NAATI recognised or approved course. The reality is that, until very recently, no test was ever designed and offered for this level (Bontempo & Levitzke-Gray 2009; Hayes & Hale 2010) and, until 2012, only one course, for one language combination, was approved. Level 5 could not be gained by test or training but was a level “awarded to those who are ‘capable of and have experience of work at international meetings and conferences requiring high level diplomatic interpreting’” (Ozolins 1998: 38). This marginal category remained a category “filled only by AIIC members” (Ozolins 1998: 39), i.e. not accessible to other non-AIIC Australian practitioners.

The NAATI nomenclature changed in 1993 and four levels were retained. Level 2 and 3 became ‘Paraprofessional Interpreter’ and ‘Professional Interpreter’ respectively, Level 4 ‘Conference Interpreter’, and Level 5 ‘Senior Conference Interpreter’. However, the modalities to gain accreditation at the highest levels did not change. Keeping the ‘Senior Conference

Interpreter' level even raised questions because it did not "represent an actual level of tested skill" like the other levels. However, "after much debate [it] was retained" (Ozolins 1998: 39). One justification possibly being that the situation was the same internationally. Indeed, even today, there is still no standardised credentialling examination for conference interpreters (Setton & Dawrant 2016: 377). The main issue with the system was that, for decades, the only possibility for Australian interpreters to gain accreditation at conference level was to enrol in a recognised school in Europe or America. This would "no doubt be beyond their means" and is likely why only two or three did so (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 38). The situation was no different for Auslan interpreters, who were not able to obtain accreditation at conference level until 2014. As indicated by Bontempo and Levitzke-Gray (2009: 154):

The levels pertaining to conference interpreting have never been made available to Auslan interpreters, however, the demand for Auslan interpreters to work at specialized conferences, and in other typically monologic or predominantly didactic settings is increasing. The level of skill and competence required to work in these environments differs from the expectations of the practitioner working at the professional interpreter level of accreditation in a typically dialogic interpreted setting; therefore, it is argued that the conference interpreter level of accreditation should be made available to Auslan interpreters.

A persisting issue in the Australian interpreting landscape, that the NAATI systems described above illustrate and have somehow cultivated, relates to the different developments and social positions of the fields of conference interpreting and of community/liaison interpreting. Each field gaining its status from the status of its clients. The first, for a long time, was considered as serving "an elite, ... prominent international figures at prominent international events", on an equal footing, a status very different to that of the interpreters who provided their services to "working class immigrants or disempowered indigenous people meeting dominant professionals or officials of the State apparatus" (Ozolins 1998: 11–12) or were simply seen as "helpers" of local deaf communities (Gile & Napier 2020: 66). From the onset, rather than dividing its system by areas of specialisations, NAATI created a hierarchical system with conference interpreting at the top, perpetuating the idea, often disputed (Gile 2006; Hayes & Hale 2010: 121), that conference interpreting requires higher language and interpreting skills.

This issue of status of interpreting/interpreters in Australia, and the difference between offering services locally in the public sector, where certification is *required*, or internationally in the private one, where certification is at best *recommended*, may explain the absence of need, for three decades, for certification at conference interpreter level. Setton and Dawrant corroborate the same idea and note about the 1993 NAATI system:

NAATI offers test-based accreditation for interpreters at the 'paraprofessional' and 'professional' levels, but not at the higher levels of 'conference interpreter' and 'senior conference interpreter'. This is probably because conference interpreting is both a very small, niche profession and one that, unlike medicine or law, or even court or community interpreting, is not seen as having a significant bearing on the wellbeing of the public at large.

(2016: 377)

After having faced pressures from the industry, from academic institutions, and from its members because of inconsistencies and limitations regarding the evolution of T&I in Australia

(Hayes & Hale 2010: 121; Ozolins 1998: 77–78), NAATI undertook to overhaul the system. Between 2012 and 2016, through a broad consultation process and in partnership with all T&I stakeholders, they worked on redesigning it. The new *Certification System* came into effect in January 2018. The categories and the nature of the certification tests changed with the introduction of certification prerequisites and of standards of performance across areas of competency. The new system “places more emphasis on education, training and ongoing professional development than the pre-2018 model of accreditation” (NAATI 2020). For interpreting, it is worth mentioning the introduction of two levels of certification for specialised areas (legal and health), and of only one level of certification for conference interpreting, which can be gained merely by test after completion of a degree in conference interpreting. Once gained, certifications must be revalidated every three years and practitioners need to provide evidence of *Work Practice* and of *Professional Development* (NAATI 2020).

Conference interpreting in Australia today

Training institutions

For many decades, there were few opportunities for interpreters working in Australia to access training in conference interpreting. Taylor-Bouladon (2007: 36) reported that, when she arrived at the end of the 1970s, several companies were “professing to provide ‘in-house’ training programmes for interpreters, unfortunately based on local rather than international standards and of insufficient duration to be acceptable”. But she does not make mention of any courses, despite the existence of formal initiatives. For example, archives from Macquarie University School of Modern Languages (minutes of a 1977 School meeting) reveal that a course in conference interpreting was offered at the time as part of a Continuing Education Program and was taught by a graduate from the University of Vienna. In a letter addressed to the Chairman of NAATI (dated September 1979), the Head of School sought advice on the procedure to have the course recognised by NAATI. Records show his request remained unanswered.

The first recognised conference interpreter course was offered at the University of Queensland from the 1980s, available only for the Japanese-English combination. It was the only course in Australia approved by NAATI and featuring on the AIIC Schools Directory. In the 1990s, other institutions (Deakin University; the University of Western Sydney) offered short courses or modules at one stage or another (Ozolins 1998: 91), but with no official recognition from NAATI or AIIC. The situation remained unchanged until 2012, when the T&I program at Monash University in Melbourne gained membership of CIUTI, and when its two-year course in interpreting was featured on the AIIC Schools Directory. That same year, it became the second course to be approved by NAATI for accreditation at Conference Interpreter level. This change paved the way for other institutions to apply and to receive approval in the following years. Today, four university courses are ‘endorsed’ by NAATI for the Conference Interpreter Certification, under the new certification scheme implemented in 2018. It is worth noting that these courses are for spoken languages only. No university programme for Auslan-English conference interpreter training presently exists in Australia (only some ‘advanced’ modules can be undertaken, at Macquarie University, for example), a local but also global issue that has implications for the professionalisation of signed language interpreters (Bontempo 2013; de Wit 2020; Gile & Napier 2020).

As the language of education is English, all these courses are offered in languages paired with English. *Macquarie University* offers a two-year degree in Chinese (Mandarin), French,

Japanese, Korean or Spanish that is featured on the AIIC Schools Directory (Macquarie University 2020). *Monash University* has a two-year degree offered in Chinese (Mandarin), French, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, or Spanish. This programme is featured on the AIIC Schools Directory (Monash University 2020). *University of New South Wales* offers their course over two years in Chinese (Mandarin), French, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Russian or Spanish (UNSW 2020). Finally, *University of Queensland* offers a two-year course in Japanese, featured on the AIIC Schools Directory (UQ 2020). *Macquarie University*, *Monash University*, and *University of New South Wales* are all CIUTI members.

Qualifications and certifications are now kept separate. The fact that these courses are ‘endorsed’ by NAATI means that their curricula have been designed to respond to the demands and level of the NAATI Certified Conference Interpreter test. Graduates can apply to sit it directly after successful completion of their course but are assessed for certification outside their university.

Conference interpreter certification

The new NAATI scheme proposes only one certification at conference level. It can be gained, in spoken languages and Auslan, by test only and is presented as follows:

Conference interpreters transfer highly complex, specialised messages from a source language into a target language. They interpret in situations such as speeches and presentations at high-level international exchanges, like international conferences, summits, meetings and negotiations (e.g. UN summits, bilateral treaty negotiations), across a broad range of domains. NAATI’s Certified Conference Interpreter Test is an objective assessment of the skills and competencies needed to practice as a conference interpreter, handling complex interpreting in international settings. Certified Conference Interpreters typically hold a master’s degree in conference interpreting (or a combination of extensive work practice and professional development) and a recommended minimum two years’ work experience as a conference interpreter in their language combination. The Certified Conference Interpreter Test assesses a candidate’s ability to provide quality, professional interpreting of complex and specialised spoken language, in a specified language direction, using modes considered appropriate in a range of typical conference situations.

(NAATI 2020)

At the time of writing, all levels included, NAATI has certified 8,838 interpreters (NAATI 2020), among whom there are 50 conference interpreters. This low figure (0.6 per cent of all certified interpreters) shows a significant gap between this and the other levels. However, this does not reflect the exact number of active conference interpreters. Because conference interpreting sits in the private segment of the industry and hiring *certified* interpreters cannot be required from employers (contrary to the public segment where government policies forcefully recommend using certified interpreters only), and because of the lack of training and testing opportunities until recently, some practitioners have worked as conference interpreters without a proper credential and see no specific interest in gaining one. With no available data from employers, it is difficult to know precisely how many interpreters went through a learning-by-doing process or were trained overseas, gained experience, and still provide services.

Among the 50 who are certified, 15 are in the Japanese-English pair (30 per cent), and 10 in the Mandarin-English pair (20 per cent). French-English and Spanish-English are the

following most represented language combinations (10 per cent). Auslan-English certifications represent 6 per cent of that total (3 individuals). Interestingly, the data seem to confirm the market needs (see below), insofar as the two most in-demand spoken languages for conference interpreting services correlate with the highest number of certified conference interpreters.

AIIC membership

As mentioned earlier, Anne Robson remained the only AIIC interpreter in Australia for many years. Despite the efforts of some members to grow this membership in the country, it has remained modest. At the time of writing, 15 AIIC members/associate members are domiciled in Australia: one Chinese-English, one Spanish-English, one Russian-English, two Italian-English, three Japanese-English, three German-English, and five French-English; and three pre-candidates, one French-English and two Auslan-English (AIIC 2020). Finding reasons to explain such a limited increase for spoken languages goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but one could justifiably wonder why this number has remained low given the current number of practising conference interpreters (NAATI certified or not) or the fact that several universities offer conference interpreting courses today. AIIC membership for Sign Language Interpreters (SLI) has been possible since 2012 only (de Wit 2020), which explains why there are globally so few SLI AIIC members.

National professional associations

There are two national professional associations in Australia. AUSIT, the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators, and ASLIA, the Australian Sign Language Interpreters' Association. Interpreter certification levels are not a criterion for membership, and no specialisation classification is mentioned on their directories. Specialisations and certifications held are only visible on each member's profile.

Working arrangements and directionality

In the Asia-Pacific region, the multilingual "Western model" (the ILO, the UN) of working arrangements, whereby interpreters work from their B and C language(s) into their A, "has had little impact" (Gile 2006: 23), and interpreters tend to work bi-directionally between their A and B languages. In conferences held in Australia, the language of the floor and of many participants is English, and a large proportion of the interpretation goes therefore into LOTE (Language Other Than English). For spoken languages, organisers generally favour bi-active booths with *retour* into English (i.e. no English booth), notably when Chinese or Japanese is one of the languages (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 90). Depending on the type of meeting (bilingual or multilingual), booths consist of two or three interpreters. In multilingual conferences, the use of relay is "almost the norm" (Taylor-Bouladon 2007: 88). Because of such specificities, relay techniques and 'working into B' are important skills and are therefore essential components in the curricula of the above-mentioned training programmes. In conferences with Auslan, interpreters generally work from a spoken language into Auslan, i.e. they "interpret into their B language" (Bontempo 2015: 115), though this may be changing as more and more deaf experts have opportunities to speak at conferences. The interpreter is often visible on stage, positioned in front of those they sign for, and providers tend to be Deaf specific agencies who manage arrangements such as positioning, lighting considerations and speaker feedback, or access to equipment.

Work opportunities and market trends

Private agencies

Collating viable and objective data and information on market needs, trends and on provision of conference interpreting services is never simple. As reported by Ozolins (1998: 91), in Australia, the task is not only difficult

but the field is so atomised and so lacking in cohesion and professional infrastructure that any attempt to ask question to quantify [needs and trends] tends to be seen as a seeking after commercial secrets. Thus, anecdote and partial information replace any more global understanding.

Despite this shortage of data, it appears that since the late 1990s a few private large agencies usually providing their services in the public sector have worked hard to develop their activities and build up capacity at a global level, and to expand their conference interpreting business (Ozolins 1998: 35), which sits in the ‘private sector’ segment of the industry. Therefore, a large part of the work in conference interpreting today is obtained from such providers who have the experience and resources to win tenders and to organise interpretation services for international meetings. Some assignments may also be negotiated directly between a client and individual interpreters (e.g. with an embassy, a government department, or a private client) but no data could be obtained by the present author to quantify that proportion. Finally, some opportunities may also be offered by the very few international organisations that exist in the region.

International organisations

Contrary to the European or the American one, the Australian conference interpreting market has a very modest institutional facet. The country (and the region) counts only a few multilingual international organisations that employ in-house or freelance conference interpreters. Three of them deserve to be mentioned for the role they play in the Australian spoken-language conference interpreting landscape.

The South Pacific Commission, established after the Second World War, is known today as The Pacific Community. An Australian initiative at the origin, it was temporarily located in Sydney, and was moved to New Caledonia in 1949. Today, the organisation has 26 member countries and territories and works “for the well-being of Pacific people through the effective and innovative application of science and knowledge, guided by a deep understanding of Pacific Island contexts and cultures” (SPC 2019). The official working languages are English and French, and the Pacific Community has its own in-house Translation and Interpretation section. On certain occasions, for example when several meetings are held simultaneously or some conferences require more interpreters, the section resorts to hiring AIIC freelancers from the region, sometimes from Australia.

The Commission on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) is a key international organisation for the Australian conference interpreting landscape, and many interpreters based in Australia have had the opportunity to work at its meetings (Stern & Hale 2015). The CAMLR Convention was signed in Canberra in 1980, as a multilateral response by the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties to potential threats to Antarctic marine ecosystems. Today, it has 25 member states and the European Union, and 10 acceding states.

Australia is the Depository State of CCAMLR whose Secretariat is in Hobart, Tasmania. The official languages are English, French, Russian and Spanish. The organisation employs in-house translators and contracts an agency to hire freelance conference interpreters for the annual meeting of the Commission where interpretation is provided in two rooms in all languages from three three-interpreter booths (French, Russian and Spanish), with return into English from each of them. Every year, thus, 18 conference interpreters are contracted for this assignment. The Secretariat also uses this meeting as a rare opportunity for students in conference interpreting from some Australian universities to observe the proceedings of a multilingual international conference.

The last organisation worth mentioning is the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP). Founded in 2001, located in Hobart, Tasmania, its purpose is to conserve listed seabirds by coordinating international activity to mitigate known threats. It has 13 members, and its official languages are English, French and Spanish. Its annual meetings require interpretation and, when held in the region, offer a work opportunity for conference interpreters based in Australia.

Perception of the market by conference interpreting services and equipment providers

To elicit some information and data about the current conference interpreting market trends in the country, a survey was sent to the 13 agencies/companies/consultant interpreters known for providing conference interpreting services and/or equipment in Australia (10 for spoken languages, 3 for Auslan). They were contacted directly via email by the present author who explained to them the purpose and scope of the questionnaire. Ten of them participated anonymously (8 for spoken languages, 2 for Auslan) by filling in an eight-question survey.

Spoken languages services

The first two questions were about the experience and frequency in the provision of such services. Five companies have been operating for more than 20 years and three companies between 10 and 15 years, which shows that all of them have a sustained experience of this market. One company offers conference interpreting services and/or equipment on more than 50 occasions per year; four companies (50 per cent) between 20 and 50; two companies between 10 and 19; and one company between 5 and 9. By adding all minima from the different ranges, we can establish that the number of events requiring conference interpreting is 155+ per year.

To determine what languages are the most in-demand on the Australian market, respondents were asked to rank ten listed languages from the most to the least in-demand. All (100 per cent) ranked Mandarin first. Responses varied for the other languages but the overall averaged ranking from second to tenth was as follows: Japanese, French, Korean, Spanish, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Russian, Arabic and German. No other language than those listed was mentioned as being more in-demand. This data shows that languages in demand differ from other world regions like Europe and America, which can be explained by Australia's geographic position and its many commercial and political commitments with countries from Asia and South-East Asia (in aid, defence, education, science, or trade).

Two questions aimed at eliciting the perceived stability of the demand for conference interpreting services over the past years and the anticipated trend for the coming years. For 50 per cent of the respondents, the demand for conference interpretation has decreased over the years; for three companies it has been stable; and one company noted an increase. As for the

Table 14.1 Survey on the percentage of conference interpreting services offered remotely, before COVID-19, since COVID-19, and projection (n = 7)

<i>RSI share</i>	<i>Before COVID-19</i>	<i>Since COVID-19</i>	<i>Future anticipated %</i>
More than 90% of operations	0	1	0
Between 51% and 90% of operations	0	3	2
Between 21% and 50% of operations	0	1	4
Between 5% and 20%	2	1	0
Less than 5%	5	1	1

future trend, four respondents believe the demand will decrease, three believe it will be stable, and one thinks it will increase. These responses indicate that the market has been stable over the years and is expected to stay stable in the future.

Finally, the use of remote simultaneous interpreting was examined. Seven respondents reported provision of such services (87.5 per cent). Table 14.1 shows the percentage of their RSI operations.

Auslan services

Both companies have been operating for more than 20 years. One provides conference interpreting services between 15 and 20 times a year; the other between 5 and 9 times. Both respondents reported an increase in demand over the last few years and expect further increase in the years to come. Only one offers remote conference interpreting services, for between 5 and 20 per cent of their operations, indicates a slight increase with the outbreak of COVID-19, and expects more remote requests in the future.

Conclusion

With the absence of critical data from certain areas, it is still difficult to picture the Australian conference interpreting landscape fully. However, a broad conclusion that can be drawn from the information provided in this chapter is that conference interpreting in Australia has gradually developed with little connection with the successful implementation of translation and interpreting services for local and public needs (Ozolins 1998: 23). As alluded to by Anne Robson in her memoirs (Kerr 1988), and echoed by Ozolins (1998), the field remained piecemeal because its role was not always well understood. For Foreign Affairs officials, ministers, heads of departments or private businesses, hiring conference interpreters was often “a low priority” (Ozolins 1998: 92). One of the issues in failing to recognise the utility of conference interpreting and to provision services was that “many companies or government departments rely upon the other party’s interpreters. Surprisingly, this attitude goes right to the top even with some government delegations dealing with the most important international contacts” (Ozolins 1998: 92).

Today, the situation is different. Even if more can still be achieved, especially for Auslan-English conference interpreting which remains an emerging specialisation, significant progress has been made in regard to training and certification, and possibly in demonstrating the critical importance of understanding cultural and language issues in domestic and external affairs, or in trade and international business. At a time when Australia wishes to advance its multilateral engagement and its leadership in the region further (DFAT 2020), one could anticipate that with more qualified conference interpreters of the right calibre, with the right language

combinations and credentials available, and with the rising demand of RSI services, the conference interpreting field Down Under may become better structured and gain more traction, visibility, and recognition.

Further reading

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