The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting – Introduction

The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting is designed as a comprehensive reference work for researchers and practitioners as well as trainers and students. Why a handbook on conference interpreting readers may ask when the trend in research has been to bring settings together (Mikkelson & Jourdenais 2015, Pöchhacker 2015), to cross modes and stress their hybridity and to accentuate the unifying elements of interpreting and translation (Baker and Saldhana 2020).

Conference interpreting still has a certain ring to it and is associated with the rise of international organizations and multinational enterprises, having assumed an instrumental role as the 20th century took shape. Moreover, despite having always been and still being a major focus from a research perspective, conference interpreting has to date not been addressed in its own dedicated volume. Works focussing solely on conference interpreting tend to be textbooks (see Gillies 2013; Jones 2002; Setton & Dawrant 2016a; 2016b), although the recent proceedings of the conference celebrating 100 years of conference interpreting and its “collection of scholarly articles and opinion pieces illustrating what different stakeholders make of this profession” (Seeber 2021: Xiii) covers more ground. Thus, our aim has been to produce a state-of-the-art compilation on the body of conference interpreting knowledge, with a systematized approach to all the different facets of its foundations, its different geographical bases, its professional issues, its applied research, and its current developments.

The Handbook aims to cover conference interpreting in its depth and breadth. Bringing together 71 researchers (and practitioners) in the field and consisting of 40 chapters, it addresses both research aspects and professional issues, history and pedagogy. Spread across seven sections – Fundamentals; Settings; Regions; Professional issues; Training and education; Research perspectives; and Recent developments – it discusses all major aspects relating to conference interpreting. In particular, it includes entirely novel features, such as mindfulness training for conference interpreters, conference interpreting in India, or the commonalities of and differences between conference and community interpreting.

Nonetheless, it cannot claim to be exhaustive. It was not possible to cover all countries and regions in which conference interpreters are at play, nor have all aspects of conference interpreting thus far been subjected to substantial research. Business conference interpreting is a case in point, as it simply does not provide enough substance for a chapter. This may be due to the fact that many assignments are confidential, but much more so that conference interpreting seems to be taking a more uniform approach than, say, community interpreting, which labels and distinctly addresses its settings (e.g. medical/educational/court interpreting). While highly varied in appearance, with conference interpreting taking place at events as varied as bidirectional business meetings, monological lecture-like medical conferences, legal depositions, trade union meetings, press conferences, talk shows in the media, technical seminars, diplomatic exchanges, refugee and asylum-related negotiations or human rights debates, research seems rarely geared towards distinct settings. The multi-faceted nature of conference interpreting did, however, reveal itself in the course of compiling the volume. This is showcased in the regional chapters, in particular, with their rich and fascinating tailored country- and culture-specific insights set against the different historical, cultural and political background conditions that have shaped the emerging conference interpreting profession in different corners of the world.
Perhaps this uniform approach stems from a certain self-image, taking for granted that conference interpreting is conference interpreting is conference interpreting. The need for differentiation, labelling and demarcating explanations has therefore been less pronounced, and people tend to fall back on cursory definitions, such as the one put forward by AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conference) stating that a conference interpreter is:

>a person who by profession acts as a responsible linguistic intermediary (alone or more often as a member of a team) in a formal or informal conference or conference-like situation, thanks to his or her ability to provide simultaneous or consecutive oral interpretation of participants' speeches, regardless of their length and complexity. (AIIC 1984: 21)

The newsletter in which this definition is found gives credit to Christophe Thiéry for the initial wording, but also states that other members have contributed to it. The newsletter also stresses that “it is still not perfect but has the merit of brevity” (AIIC 1984: 21). AIIC’s definition is echoed in the more recent definition by NAATI, the Australian national standards and certifying authority for translators and interpreters.

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 n.d.)

What emerges from these task specifications and is widely accepted is the fact that, especially simultaneous, but also consecutive interpreting is one of, if not the most complex, language processing tasks. This holds true especially in view of its duration, intricate nature and immediacy. Executing this challenging task relies upon a unique skill set and a certain disposition. It is against this backdrop that the Handbook chapters look into the respective cognitive and processing dimensions, aspects of learning and training, expertise and aptitude-based requirements, setting-, mode- and technology-related manifestations, etc. At the same time, the cognitive, communicative, situative and cultural factors are bound to be major determinants of any type of interpreting. Consequently, we strongly believe the insights presented in this Handbook serve to inform and strengthen other fields of interpreting, too.

The approach chosen for the Handbook was to have as many chapters as possible be co-authored. By collaborating on a chapter, contributors combined their areas of expertise, developing innovative and novel approaches to traditional topics, avoiding overlap with previous publications, introducing different angles and ensuring comprehensive coverage of the chapters’ themes. Another central feature was a two-step review process. All manuscripts were double-peer-reviewed by either contributing authors of other chapters or external reviewers. The revised drafts were then subjected to another double review by the two editors of the volume, thus undergoing a second revision process. We are grateful to all contributors both for being open-minded and willing to collaborate even with new colleagues and for dedicating such extensive time to the dual revision process. Putting together a volume like this is no small undertaking, and many tough decisions had to be made along the way. Yet, we had the pleasure of receiving the full support of all of the contributors throughout. We would also like to extend a special thank you to the external reviewers, in alphabetical order: Ian Andersen, Martina Behr, Karen Bontempo, Ivana Čeňková, Caterine Chabasse, Carmen Delgado Luchner, Adolfo Gentile, Anne Catherine Gieshoff, Josh Goldsmith, Ewa Gumul, Sandra Hale, Jim Hlavac, Severine Hubscher-Davidson, Paule Kekeh, Min-Hua Liu, Gabriele Mack, Ricardo Munoz
With the bulk of the work on the volume having been carried out in 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt. Many of our contributors were affected by its repercussions in one way or another, in some cases being unfortunate enough to contract the virus. We are immensely appreciative of our contributors having made it possible to keep to our original timeline despite the evident challenges, as well as updating their chapters to include a note on the latest relevant COVID-related developments. At the same time, we are deeply saddened by the passing in March 2021 due to COVID-19 of one of the finest and most well-known members of our community and co-author of the chapter on diplomatic conference interpreting, Sergio Viaggio. Having served from 1991 until his retirement in 2005 as Head of the Interpretation Section at the United Nations Office in Vienna, published more than fifty papers on translation and interpreting and lectured in many universities around the world, he has been looked up to as a most senior interpreter and interpreting scholar by many of us. His good-humoured and easy-going demeanour in dealing with all matters relating to the handbook chapter will be happily remembered by us editors.

Despite the challenging circumstances, working on the Volume has been a fascinating experience. Getting in touch with the major players in the conference interpreting community and exchanging views on so many aspects of the field has been a real treat. Their swiftness and sharp, to-the-point responses and submissions seemed to reflect the interpreters behind the contributors.

On a more personal note, serving as editors has been enriching in further respects. For the German editor, Michaela Albl-Mikasa, it was interesting to learn that Jean Herbert, whom we all know through his 1952 classic ‘Interpreter’s Handbook/Manuel de l’interprète’, held a Chair in Eastern Mythologies at the University of Geneva and translated the Indian yogic classics including works by Sri Aurobindo, whom he had the privilege of meeting in person and of whom he considered himself a disciple. After more than 30 years of admiring and following Sri Aurobindo, this has been a true revelation for her. The Swedish editor, Elisabet Tiselius, was particularly taken by the different country chapters, which brought to life just how conference interpreting is indeed a global practice, and how, because locally anchored, it is differently shaped with regional specificities. She also had not anticipated the intriguing and thought-provoking character of the mindfulness chapter.

Another gratifying part of the work on the Volume was the coming together of the two editors. When one embarks on a journey like this, it is impossible to predict the nature of the collaboration. It was quite fascinating to find we made a perfectly complementary team, incredibly attuned in our discussions and evaluations of chapters and topics, and providing invaluable feedback on our respective chapters. This left the work feeling entirely unburdened throughout, also thanks to the straight, prompt, easy-natured and mutually supportive initiative taken wherever necessary.

Our first thematic section, the Fundamentals, starts with a historical overview focusing on conference interpreting in particular (Chapter 1). The novelty of this chapter lies not only in its exclusive focus on the history of conference interpreting, but also in the fact that it is enriched by the collective knowledge of three historians of interpreting studies. The next two sections take an almost exhaustive view of the basics of conference interpreting with respect to the two different modes (simultaneous and consecutive, Chapter 2) and the unique note-taking technique used in conference interpreting (Chapter 3). These chapters address the basics of the techniques from a performance perspective as well as discussing pertinent research studies, thus rendering the content accessible to
all possible readers of the Volume. The last chapter of the section deals with the issue that has become in vogue in the past couple of years: the commonalities of and differences between conference interpreting and community interpreting (Chapter 4). Considering that the (cognitive) basis for the task is very similar, the chapter contributes to the discussion of whether they should really be considered two different professions or not.

As the heading suggests, the second thematic section on Settings focusses on the different settings that are usually included in conference interpreting, namely diplomatic conference interpreting (Chapter 5), conference interpreting at press conferences (Chapter 6), media conference interpreting (Chapter 7) and conference interpreting at the two major institutional employers of conference interpreters, the EU (Chapter 8) and the UN (Chapter 9). Conference interpreting, as pointed out above, is generally understood as all-encompassing, but this section, and specifically the chapter on diplomatic interpreting, makes it clear that settings can be very different within conference interpreting, too.

Since conference interpreting, while international by definition, is rarely approached from a global perspective, we aimed to include descriptions of conference interpreting from six continents in our third thematic section on the Regions. Our contributors describe conference interpreting in the United States (Chapter 10), Russia (Chapter 11), Japan (Chapter 12), South Korea (Chapter 13), Australia (Chapter 14), China (Chapter 15), India (Chapter 16), Sub-Saharan Africa (Chapter 17) and Brazil (Chapter 18), respectively. We are particularly enthusiastic about this section as we are not aware of any previous publications with such a broad coverage. Conference interpreting in India (Chapter 16), above all, sees its world premiere.

The fourth section is devoted to Professional issues, with areas which have been thoroughly researched in conference interpreting. The section covers quality and norms in conference interpreting (Chapter 19), testing for professional qualification in conference interpreting (Chapter 20), the status and profession as well as the professionalization of conference interpreters (Chapter 21), and finally ethics and codes of ethics in conference interpreting (Chapter 22). These topics are tightly interwoven in conference interpreting and, as the reader will discover, not as easily accessible as other topics. At the same time, quality, testing and ethics are important points of departure for driving further professionalization of interpreting.

In the fifth section, we approach Training and education. The section starts with aptitude for conference interpreting (Chapter 23), followed by learning and teaching conference interpreting (Chapter 24), and finishes with theory and training in conference interpreting (Chapter 25). While the two first chapters give a comprehensive overview of the research into aptitude and teaching, the last chapter proposes to investigate which theories of conference interpreting have permeated into teaching and to what extent. As conference interpreting is a very practical topic and was in many cases in the early days taught in the style of ‘learning-by-doing’, with students still preferring mileage in the booth over theoretical studies, it is very interesting to see what type of theories and research results have been taken up in teaching.

Our sixth thematic section, devoted to Research, reflects the cognitive processes research focus in conference interpreting, but also shows that novel approaches have been introduced to the field. The section covers traditional research areas, such as working memory and cognitive processes (Chapter 26), strategies and capacity management (Chapter 27), expertise (Chapter 28) and discourse studies (Chapter 31). It also takes on newer alleys of research, such as stress and emotion (Chapter
29), sex and gender (Chapter 30), corpus studies (Chapter 32), eye-tracking studies (Chapter 33) and neuroimaging (Chapter 34).

The last thematic section brings together chapters on Recent developments in conference interpreting. It covers distance conference interpreting (Chapter 35), so very appropriate at the time of writing the Volume in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The other chapters discuss new technologies in conference interpreting (Chapter 36), the relationship between conference interpreters and researchers (Chapter 37), sign language conference interpreting (Chapter 38), which is rarely addressed with a conference interpreting focus, the impact of English as a lingua franca (Chapter 39), and our most novel approach, namely mindfulness training for conference interpreters (Chapter 40).

We hope that the readers will feel as enriched in reading this book as we have felt compiling it and hope to see the book become a fundamental synopsis and guide for all those interested in conference interpreting research and training. We also hope to inspire new research and new professional ambitions and to ignite practitioners’ interest in interpreting studies.

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References


