

## Should Court Interpreters and Conference Interpreters Be Trained in Separate Academic Programs?

Josette Coughlin

Volume 29, Number 4, décembre 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/002416ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/002416ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Coughlin, J. (1984). Should Court Interpreters and Conference Interpreters Be Trained in Separate Academic Programs? *Meta*, 29(4), 420–421.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/002416ar>

---

## **SHOULD COURT INTERPRETERS AND CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS BE TRAINED IN SEPARATE ACADEMIC PROGRAMS ?**

Should court interpreters and conference interpreters be trained in separate academic programs ? The question came to my attention when it was raised during a professional meeting by a well-known and successful California court interpreter responsible for hiring new court interpreters in her home state. She expressed her disappointment with some candidates who had been trained as conference interpreters. She reproached them for being *prima donnas* who did not understand slang and were not familiar with subcultures either in English or in Spanish speaking countries. These candidates, she said, had been taught to improve the speaker's speech where necessary, to use only proper language and never to be offensive. To top it all off, these would-be court interpreters expected to work for short periods of time and to be relieved by their team mates every half hour. The discouraged court interpreter seeking new candidates to work in the legal field concluded her lament by asking whether academic institutions involved in teaching Translation and Interpretation should consider training court interpreters separately from conference interpreters. Even though I am sympathetic to her plight, my answer to her was and remains negative. Court interpreters and conference interpreters should not be trained separately but conference interpreters will need supplementary training before they can become professional court interpreters.

Let me explain my position : court interpreting is a specialization and should be taught as an additional skill not as a separate one. In the same manner as the future dermatologist or oncologist needs added training after his general medicine internship, the court interpreter needs added skills after becoming proficient in consecutive and simultaneous interpretation. Let us say in passing that court interpreters should be as well paid as conference interpreters, if not better, which is seldomly the case.

I am convinced that a good training in so-called conference interpretation is a necessary basis

for any professional interpreter. What does a good program in conference interpretation teach ? First of all it strives to give the future interpreter a thorough understanding of the interpreting act. It emphasizes the subtleties of intercultural communications. Teaching a conference interpreter not to improve on the syntax of the defendant when in court should be a relatively easy task if the student has been made to understand the special nature of his/her function in court.

Secondly, training in conference interpreting is synonymous with thorough training in consecutive and simultaneous techniques. Both of these techniques are indispensable to the court interpreter. Many courts are now equipped with portable simultaneous interpretation systems. One does not master simultaneous interpretation without thorough training. If we attempt a comparison between interpreting and the sport of running we can say that a bilingual person resembles a week-end jogger while the simultaneous interpreter is ready to run a marathon after months of daily training. When the courts do not use telephonic equipment the interpreter has to have developed an excellent note-taking system in order to be a successful consecutive interpreter.

Thirdly, training in public speaking will be most useful to the court interpreter. He might not often be called upon to make a speech in front of a distinguished international gathering, but he will still need to be heard distinctly and clearly and he will have to know how to protect his voice from becoming strained after several hours of work. All these skills are taught in a program in conference interpretation.

One might argue that knowledge of parliamentary procedure or of the functions of various international organizations is not a necessity for court interpreters. In many cases it might be true. However, an interpreter is never too well informed. The broader his knowledge, the better his ability to comprehend and hence interpret in any set of circumstances. The true sign of a well-rounded education does not reveal itself by an aloofness from daily trials and tribulations but on the contrary by a deeper understanding of the whole human nature and a better grasp of the variety of socio-economic problems faced by industrialized as well as developing socie-

ties. A good interpreter is an extremely perceptive human being. How else could he almost cybernetically decipher the complete meaning of a message, taking into account gestures, intonations and speech rhythm? Consequently I feel reasonably sure that the conference interpreter described as a prima donna by the California court interpreter at the beginning of our discussion was probably not a very good interpreter in any situation.

I suggested earlier that interpreters should take additional courses to prepare for court interpreting. These courses may well be taken during their conference interpreting training. Knowing from the start that he or she is interested in court interpreting, the student can take a course in Introduction to Law at the very beginning of his or her training. Courses in para-legal training and courses in legal translation are all recommended.

A course of study in conference interpretation will not generally include an in-depth study of different legal systems, court procedure and the learning of a sufficient amount of legal terminology. It will certainly not introduce the students to sub-languages often used by defendants. These skills could be acquired in additional courses or, even better, by visiting the courts during bilingual trials, accepting increasingly important assignments in the municipal courts or doing a stint as an interpreter at the Federal penitentiary. The pay for many of these tasks is minimal but the experience is invaluable.

I would like to conclude by saying that to my knowledge the interpreters who have successfully passed the much feared US Federal Courts Interpreters' Examinations have had both formal training in conference interpretation and practice in the local courts prior to being accredited by the US Federal Courts.

JOSETTE COUGHLIN