On Comintern and Hush-a-Phone: Early history of simultaneous interpretation equi

Simultaneous interpretation was used prior to the Nuremberg Trial, although information is contradictory and incomplete.

Cyril FLEROV.
Published: October 30, 2013 Last updated: February 19, 2018

There are many references to simultaneous interpretation being used well before its “official” birthdate – the Nuremberg Trial. The information available, however, is incomplete, inconsistent and often contradictory. Let’s try to summarize the situation, establish a clear timeline and clarify some common misconceptions.

Official party line

Simultaneous interpretation was invented in 1926 when a patent was received by an IBM employee by the name of Gordon Finley. This mode of interpretation was only sporadically used before WWII, and was then employed en masse only at the Nuremberg Trial, when “Colonel Léon Dostert, General Eisenhower’s personal interpreter, was called upon to find a practical solution to the language barrier.”

Chronological facts

The American businessman and philanthropist Edward Filene (left) came up with the idea to use simultaneous interpretation in the League of Nations as early as April 2, 1925 (Baigorri Jalón, 2011). Filene writes to Sir E. Drummond on that day:

One high quality microphone will be placed on a pedestal or stand at the speaker’s location to pick up his words. This microphone will be connected through an amplifier to a number of headphones which will be installed in an adjoining quiet room. Each headset will terminate at an interpreter’s booth or position in the room. The interpreter’s booth will be provided with an ordinary telephone desk stand on which is mounted a high quality close talking microphone which will be connected through another amplifier to a number of head set located at a designated section of the auditorium or meeting hall. The translated speech of each interpreter would follow simultaneously with the delivery of the original speech, the only delay being that of recording the speech and the ability of the interpreter to translate directly and rapidly from the stenographic notes received from the recorder.

It is often argued that the first IBM system for simultaneous interpretation was called Hushaphone. The name is mentioned, for example, by Andre Kaminker in his University of Geneva lecture in 1955. It is not exactly accurate. Because Filene was not an engineer himself, he involved the British engineer A. Gordon-Finlay (often incorrectly called Gordon Finlay, Finley or Findlay), who was working in Geneva at that time. They used existing telephone equipment to set up the system, thus giving the name “telephonic interpretation” to this mode of interpreting.

The system was originally called “the Filene-Finlay simultaneous translator.” Filene approached AT&T with a proposal to collaborate on developing the system but AT&T rejected it (Berkley, 1998, p. 203). IBM later participated and further developed the system with the assistance of company founder Thomas Watson Sr. (right). In its 1945 letter IBM calls the system the “International Translator System”; this is, however, the only mention of the name known to the author. The original 1926 patent was issued to the “IBM Hushaphone Filene-Finlay (sic) system”. Thomas Watson put the system into production – even though his marketing people did not see much potential in it – and paid the inventors a small royalty (Berkley, 1998, p.204).

Hushaphone (variants: Hush-a-Phone, Hush a Phone), however, is strictly speaking a completely different device and had existed as a separate non-electrical attachment before 1926. It is a silencer attached to a telephone “to give the user privacy against nearby eavesdroppers and to make for a quieter line by excluding extraneous noise.” According to Dr. Ritter (Baigorri Jalón, 2011) “the machines used for transmitting speeches were patented in 1921 under the name of Hushaphone and have been utilised since then…”

Hush-a-Phone as a company seems to date back to 1920. Because Filene and Gordon-Finlay originally used existing telephone parts, the Hush-a-Phone attachment was possibly originally used as a system component, but the attachment is very unlikely to be Filene and Gordon-Finlay’s invention. They used the name as a part of their system, however, which may imply further collaboration between original system designers, IBM, and Hush-a-Phone Corporation, or is more likely to be a pure coincidence as James Parker notes in “The Soundscape of Justice” (Parker, 2011, p. 981).
Simultaneous interpretation was first used in the late 1920s. No. Simultaneous interpretation has always been there since time immemorial as chuchotage. I recall at least one instance when it was mentioned (although I forgot the source): one of first European visitors to the Dalai Lama several centuries ago mentions in his memoir that the interpreter was so good that he was whispering into Dalai Lama's ear without stopping. In terms of the mechanism of simultaneous interpretation (SI) and related neurolinguistic processes, there is no substantial difference, if any, between SI in the booth and chuchotage, except, maybe, voice volume control and a greater level of fatigue if you do not have a booth. Therefore, we can only speak about simultaneous interpretation with equipment as a XX century invention.

When was simultaneous interpretation with equipment first used?

Accounts differ on that as well. Moreover we should distinguish using what is now known as simultaneous interpretation equipment to read pre-translated texts and actually performing live SI with equipment.

Soviet historiography maintained that SI was first used, of course, in the Soviet Union. For example, Gofman argues that "simultaneous interpretation was first used in the Soviet Union at the VI Congress of the Comintern in 1928 (photo at left) The Krasnaya Niva magazine that year shows a photo of the interpreters sitting in armchairs in front of the podium. On their necks there is a bulky fixture supporting a microphone. There is no headset, sound comes from the podium." (Gofman, 1963, p. 20)

Western authors mention the June meeting of the International Labor Conference in 1927. The League of Nations News in August 1927 reports on the new "Electric Interpreter" and hopes it will help "persons imprisoned in their own language".

Timeline

Based on information in the literature and online sources the following timeline can be created. Some dates are contradictory.

1920: IBM's "International Translator System" is used at the International Chamber of Commerce Convention.

1921: Hush-A-Phone Corporation established.

1925: Hush-A-Phone attachment patented.

Circa 1922: "International Translator System" used at the IV Pan American Conference in Washington, DC (according to an IBM letter from 1945, probably incorrect).

1926 (27 November): G. Fleury announces a 4-6 week preparatory course in "telephonic interpretation" to begin in December, at the end of which 24 students will be chosen by exam to receive further training through April 1927.


1927 (4 June, 10:30 am): SI system (by IBM) first used at the League of Nations in the International Labor Conference (Taylor-Bouladon, 2007, p.15). Miriam Sharon argues, however, that it was not simultaneous interpretation per se: "At the International Labor Conference in Geneva in 1927, the Finlay-Filene system was used for the simultaneous reading of pretranslated texts where the speakers had made available the text of their speech well in advance for the interpreters. The interpreters would translate the text prior to the session and read it at the exact same time that the speech was being delivered." (Sharon, 2004). The system reportedly saved ILO £32,700 (Gaiba, 1998, p. 31). Technically speaking, we cannot say simultaneous interpretation was first used then, only SI equipment.

1927 (20 July): A. Gordon-Finlay writes a report, noting: "Experience has shown this work to be of a difficult and exacting nature, demanding special qualities on the part of the interpreters and particularly fatigu[ing] owing to the degree of concentration involved, and it would seem desirable to place instantaneous interpreters in a special category receiving extra Conference pay, to encourage them to take it up." (Baigorri Jalón, 2011).


1928: SI used during the VI Congress of Comintern, USSR (Gofman, 1963, p. 20).

1929 (14 May): Report by the director of the 1928 experiment with simultaneous interpreting at the ILO during the 13th session of the Conference, noting: "It was found that, on an average, thirty minutes of consecutive work proved the maximum during which satisfactory translation could be made, after which the results were liable to deteriorate owing to fatigue." (Baigorri Jalón, 2011).

1929: SI used at the Scientific Organisation Committee in Geneva.

1929: SI used at the International Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam.

1930: Siemens & Halske SI system used at the International Conference on Energy in Berlin (Gaiba, 1998).

1933: SI booths and interpreter headsets were first used at the XIII Session of the Executive Committee of Comintern (Gofman, 1963, p. 20).


1935: XV International Physiology Congress, Leningrad, USSR. An opening speech by Academician Ivan Pavlov (photo right) was interpreted simultaneously from Russian into French, English, and German. A wired system was used. Delegates received instructions how to use the equipment (Gofman, 1963, p. 20).
1935: SI introduced in the bilingual (French and Flemish) Belgian Parliament.[9] Some maintain that it wasn’t until 1936.[10]
1936: SI used in Scheveningen, Holland.[11]
1944: SI at a conference in Philadelphia.[12]
1945-1946: Nuremberg Trial.

References


Cyril Flerov is a professionally trained Russian (A) English (B) conference interpreter based in San Francisco with more than 20 years experience serving a variety of clients. He has taught interpreting at the St. Petersburg Institute of Foreign Languages (Russia) and the Monterey Institute of International Studies (USA).

The author thanks Luigi Luccarelli for his help in editing this article.


Enter your footer here, if any

Recommended citation format: