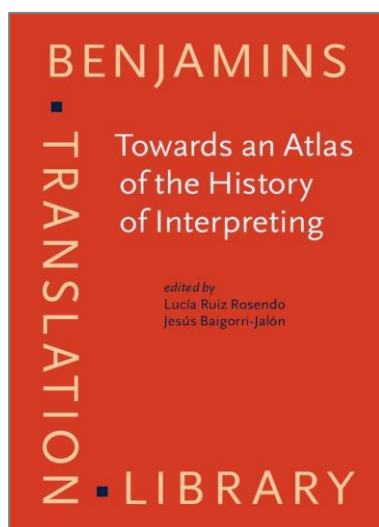


BOOKS

Lucía Ruiz Rosendo, Jesús Baigorri-Jalón (eds.), *Towards an Atlas of the History of Interpreting: Voices from around the world*, London, John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2023, 316 p.



A pandemic can prevent a conference from taking place, but not researchers from pursuing their passionate work. Case in point: the remarkable *Towards an Atlas of the History of Interpreting: Voices from around the world* edited by Lucía Ruiz Rosendo (University of Geneva) and Jesús Baigorri-Jalón (University of Salamanca), prestigious scholars in the fields of interpreting in conflict zones and interpreting history. The publication was initially envisaged as a volume of proceedings from the symposium *Research on the history of interpreting: Voices from around the world*, scheduled for October 2020 in Geneva, a natural continuation of other symposiums, organized in 2014 at the University of Rikkyo and in 2017 at Hong Kong Baptist University, respectively. But history changed plans. Fortunately, the outcome is no less enjoyable or less useful to the readers.

The present book *is* an atlas, yet, like anything depending on a changing reality and, even more, on changing perspectives, it is also work in progress, as suggested by the use of “towards” in the title. It is an atlas in the sense that it represents certain spaces at specific moments, but spaces, times and the ways we perceive them transform, so this work is also a possible starting point for new research that will complete it, or even adapt it to new contexts.

The volume takes the reader to all the inhabited continents and different periods; it “presents a global and interconnected history” (p. 16). A glimpse at the table of contents is enough to see that this book is, in itself, an illustration of the current state of the art in interpreting history research. It brings together approaches from “history, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, psychology and geography” (p. 1), and thus brilliantly exemplifies prolific themes for current research in interpreting history: from the individual’s



personality and experience to the phenomena concerning the entire professional class, from the self-narratives to national governments' policies with respect to interpreters in war zones, to name but a few. Each contribution provides thorough information about the topic and looks at it through a well-defined hermeneutical lens. In a nutshell, "[t]he book combines global and local perspectives and safeguards different approaches within the discipline while fostering different methodologies which may be used either alternatively or complementarily" (p. 12).

The purpose of the endeavour is clearly highlighted by the editors, who underline that "outcomes of historical research, complemented with a variety of interdisciplinary approaches, may have a positive influence both on interpreting training and education – how the interpreting skills are administered and how the profession evolves – and on the actual exercise of interpreting, as performed by practitioners" (p. 2). What a beautiful coincidence, in this context, that the book was published the same year UNESCO launched the Indigenous Languages Decade (2022–2032)!

In the first chapter of the volume, "Indigenous interpreters on trial in the Spanish Empire: The rise and fall of the Maya interpreter Don Hernando Uz in seventeenth-century Yucatán", Caroline Cunill describes in thorough detail the trial of an interpreter accused of encouraging Maya to rebel against the governor of Tekax. In doing so, the researcher examines several adjacent topics, thus not only providing a glimpse into one very specific trial, but also highlighting the political dimension of the colonial justice system of the time and the attitude of the authorities towards the interpreters they had not selected themselves. A lot of interesting information with respect to the interpreters' work is provided, like the existence of rules for the profession (including a code of conduct and "a clear line between interpretation and legal advice" (p. 26)) or the list of skills required to be a General Interpreter (*idem*), to take but two examples. Conflicts arose nevertheless as more subtle factors also intervened, from the different players' own interests and beliefs to the intricacies of the affair. This research can "help understand how power relationship not only impacts on the linguistic and cultural mediation processes [...], but has also a key role in shaping the rules guaranteeing the ethics of interpreting and, above all, in determining the way in which those rules are understood and applied in specific sociopolitical contexts" (p. 48).

Gertrudis Payàs and Fernando Ulloa ("Interpreters of Mapudungun and the Chilean State during the 1880–1930 period: Linguistic change and social adaptation") focus "on some families of interpreters and interpretation practices that can provide clues to understand the social, political, and linguistic dynamics while serving as indicators of the power relationships between languages and the groups that spoke them" (p. 53). Inevitably, the story of the foundation of the Chilean state involved a variety of political and social aspects which required mediated communication between the local Mapuche population and the Spanish-speaking authorities. Starting from original documents of the time which recount such interactions, the authors draw the interpreters' working context and their position within the society, while also raising interesting questions about the factors which come into play at different moments to determine interpreting professionals' status and fate.

Marcos Sarmiento offers "An overview of the role of interpreters during the Portuguese expansion through Africa (1415–1600)". While depicting the specific Portuguese interests and strategy in Africa, the author looks at how communication unfolded

throughout this period of early globalization and how the overall approach to linguistic interaction and particular elements of the local contexts determined who ensured the interpretation and how. It also tackles the perception of interpreters by their clients and their social position (from those who enjoyed a privileged position and consequent financial retribution to slaves).

The next chapter focuses on the same continent, but a different empire, with a different approach. In “Mediating a complex cultural matrix: Indigenous Muslim interpreters in Colonial Senegal, 1850–1920”, Tamba M’bayo draws collective and individual portraits to highlight a group of people who used their knowledge to provide information, as required, but also to help their kinfolk. Though on a subaltern position, “the Muslim interpreters filled a vantage position from which to pursue localized personal, family, and societal goals that at times overlapped with – but often diverged from – those French colonial authorities prioritized” (p. 121). Most importantly, this topic is also an opportunity for M’bayo to reflect upon the sources historians should use in studying colonial history and to question the conclusions of narratives based only on European testimonies and “scientific” works of the time.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, as Kayoko Takeda shows in “Interpreting with ‘human sympathy’: Missionaries in uniform during the Pacific War and occupation of Japan”. In other words, individuals may at one point have been forced to turn into actors of a war between two countries they were closely attached to. It was indeed the case of many American missionaries and their children who lived sometimes for decades in Japan and of Japanese *Nisei* (second-generation immigrants) who were asked to use their knowledge of the two languages in working for military intelligence. As testimonies quoted in the chapter show, this could be emotionally disruptive and required a distinction between Japan as a society and a civilization and Japan as an aggressor. Nevertheless, this experience did not prevent many of these interpreters to return to this country and to continue living there after the end of the war.

In his chapter “The colonized in conflict: Taiwanese military interpreters and the postwar British war crime trials”, Shi-chi Mike Lan starts from the careers of 18 Taiwanese military interpreters who worked for the Japanese army during WWII and were judged as war criminals by the British after the war in Malaya and Singapore (a total of 105 wartime interpreters associated with the Japanese military were put on trial by the Allies, 99 were convicted and 31 executed). The individual destinies are analysed from the point of view of age, training, timing and geographical deployment and within the context of the Japanese-occupied Malaya and Singapore. The condition of “colonized in conflict” – colonized people working for the colonizer for other colonized people – put them into a very fragile position, eventually turning them into a target when “pursuing justice (or seeking revenge) on behalf of the colonized subjects of Chinese and Malay [...] became a top priority in the postwar British war crime trials in Southeast Asia” (190-191).

Laura Rademaker writes about “Interpreters of mission: How indigenous peoples shaped mission projects across Australia and the Pacific” and highlights interesting similarities and especially differences between the two geographical areas. After reviewing recent scholarship related to indigenous people and their needs, the author looks at the stories of three Aboriginal interpreters who helped establish Christian missions in different

parts of Australia. This approach allows her to argue that “the work of interpreters was, fundamentally, a way to honour linguistic connections to the landscape, to embody, speak and untimely care for Country as Aboriginal people had always done, but now in a context of drastic change” (p. 194) and to “suggest that it also embodied ancient responsibilities and traditions that had little to do with the encounters with Europeans or their agents but had everything to do with Indigenous priorities for their own Country and kin” (p. 209).

The 17th-century dragomans Christoforo Tarsia and Ambrosio Grillo are Natalie Rothman’s “characters” in her enticing description of the complex relationships which presided over dragomans’ status and work at that time: “Domesticating dragomans. Affect and textual circulations between the hyperlocal and the trans-imperial”. The archive material related to the bitter 1660 dispute between the two provides the author a window into a world in which “dragomans’ subjectivities and professional practices of mediation were shaped by emergent technologies of governmentality, such as the controlled circulation of particular forms of knowledge and kinds of persons inside and outside the space of the bailate” (p. 214). A great variety of primary and secondary sources are used to explore the different factors intervening in dragomans’ work and decisions: from political allegiances to personal interests, from secrecy to kinship, and many others.

On a more theoretical note, while also relying on an impressive corpus (some 105,000 pages in 22 languages, p. 256), Michaela Wolf discusses the potential of interpreters’ memoirs to informing historical research. “The interpreter as ‘anti-hero’: Interpreters’ memoirs and their contribution to constructing a history of interpreting” is an original and highly informative chapter that illustrates how such sources can be used objectively, put in the context underpinned by political circumstances, as well as by their authors’ lives and personalities. This approach can counterbalance the hero-interpreter image and thus contribute to a more objective view on what interpreters really feel, think and do: “the (self-)image of the anti-hero interpreter, as revealed in the self-narratives, is mostly constituted by a strong sense of protection, by daily practice of solidarity, by a natural approach to their activity in terms of psychological and physical support, and by so-called ‘fusion interpreting’” (p. 261).

Despite all the professional improvements in the last decades, recent interpreting history shows that a lot still needs to be done to acknowledge interpreters’ work and ensure basic safety during and after assignments. In “When the armies went back home: Local interpreters and the politics of protection”, Hilary Footitt sheds light on the intricacies of a situation that, despite certain media coverage in Western countries, has not benefited from all the attention it should have. Despite their essential role, “[i]nterpreters are invisible, archivally eccentric, or at best highly marginal to the core business of war and conflict” (p. 269). Many of the those who ensured linguistic mediation for the British, French and Danish armies found themselves in a most delicate position when Western forces withdrew from Afghanistan. In Footitt’s words, “the figure of the local interpreter was left uncomfortably suspended between supranational frames of professional interpreting, the on the ground complexities of multilateral operations, and the political agendas of individual nation-states” (284). Thousands of persons and their families are concerned by this situation. In her conclusion, the author stresses the importance of the lessons to be learned by NATO so that proper protection can be provided in time to local interpreters in conflict areas.

Given the importance of interpreting history for understanding this polymorphous profession, it is no surprise the field has attracted so much attention lately¹. It will undoubtedly continue to do so, for the benefit of present-day interpreters, trainers and trainees, as well as for a better understanding of the history behind the scenes.

This volume is important for future research as it manages to put history in the context of present-day preoccupations, thus establishing links between the past and the present that can be relevant for the challenges the profession is facing. The methodological approach, with social and humanities scientists using the tools of their “trade” to tackle interpreting-related topics, along with the extensive bibliography of each contribution are noteworthy. Overall, the volume is a very useful read for researchers in a whole range of fields (from diplomacy to colonial studies, from psychology to law), as well as interpreting trainers and trainees.

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¹ The editors show how vivid the field is by reminding the readers of recent exhibitions – “The Interpreter’s One Hundred Years of Solitude” (University of Salamanca, inaugurated in 2012); “One Trial-four languages. The breakthrough for simultaneous interpreting and its consequences” (Elke Limberger-Katsumi – AIIC, first held in 2013); “Interpreters in Nuremberg 1945–1946” (University of Salamanca, inaugurated in 2015); Barbara Cassin’s “Après Babel, traduire” (Marseille, inaugurated, in 2016) (<https://www.mucem.org/programme/exposition-et-temps-forts/apres-babel-traduire>); “Pioneer Female Interpreters (1900–1953): Bridging the Gap” (University of Salamanca, inaugurated in 2018 (see https://ec.europa.eu/education/knowledge-centre-interpretation/news/pioneer-female-interpreters_da) – and publications, such as the two issues of *The Interpreters’ Newsletter* dedicated to the history of interpreting: 21/2016 on interpreters and interpreting throughout history (<https://www.openstarts.units.it/collections/5db37bf6-031f-47ff-b2de-ae7ab764476a>) and 27bis/2022 on interpreting in Nuremberg (<https://www.openstarts.units.it/collections/bb283fa8-4b60-4662-b690-daebdaf84c8>).