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

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

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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 headsets 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 headsets which will be located in 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-Findlay (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).
Delegates received instructions how to use the equipment (Gofman, 1963, p. 20).

Another important component of the system is a booth.

There are photos of early booths at Geneva for the IBM system, but later at Nuremberg … there were only glass side partitions between the interpreters’ desks; the latter were open at the front and therefore far from soundproof. They can be seen in the photos of the Nuremberg courtroom. Not until fully soundproof booths were installed for the United Nations in New York, two decades after Filene-Finlay, did they become universal and the interpreters could speak at normal volume without fear of disturbing the people around them.

Gofman argues, however, that booths (and headsets) were used at the XIII Session of the Executive Committee of Comintern as early as 1933 (Gofman, 1963).

"Today Edward [Filene]'s creation, albeit in a more perfected form, has virtually become a fixed feature at international gatherings everywhere. And anyone who picks up an earphone at the United Nations and carefully examines it will find inconspicuously inscribed on it the words "Filene – Findlay." It is another reminder of the Boston storekeeper’s far-reaching creativity and far-ranging concerns." (Berkley, 1998, p. 204).

A Few Misconceptions

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

1928: SI used at 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 Economy 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. Some maintain that it wasn’t until 1936.

1936: SI used in Scheveningen, Holland.

1944: SI at a conference in Philadelphia.

1945-1946: Nuremberg Trial.

References


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