

Early Stages of Interpreting Use in Estonia

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Abstract

This article aims to provide some insight into the history of interpreting in Estonia. The topic has not been studied before, and my research helps to preserve the fast-disappearing oral heritage of the unwritten history of interpreting in Estonia. The present article covers two periods: 1918–1940 and 1944–1991. The first period is studied through an analysis of 14 editions of memoirs by Estonian diplomats and the minutes from the peace negotiations with Russia in 1919. The research question is whether Estonia as a young state used interpreting to increase its symbolic capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu. The second period is studied through a corpus of 33 interviews. The question addressed is to what extent interpreting was used. This research led to the discovery that Estonian–Russian–Estonian interpreting was used in various state bodies. In addition, for about 60 years theatre performances were simultaneously interpreted from Estonian into Russian, while the 1980 Olympic Regatta marked the use of Estonian–English as a conference language combination. Research findings for both periods lead to the conclusion that people who operated as interpreters were multi-professionals. No interpreter training was available until the Olympic Regatta.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic capital, independence, Estonia, conference interpreting

1 Introduction

This article examines the history of interpreting in Estonia from the beginning of the twentieth century. Neither the development of interpreting nor the explosive growth of its use after the restoration of independence in 1991 has been studied in Estonia. This article focuses on two periods: 1918–1940 and 1944–1991, covering the first era of independence and half a century as a Soviet republic. The temporal starting point of the study is the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Estonia on 24 February 1918 with a focus on the early years: to what extent did the young republic use interpreting to increase its symbolic capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu? The material examined included 14 editions of memoirs by people involved in foreign relations and archival documents. The question addressed studying post-war years is whether there was any interpreting at all, given the changed political circumstances. To answer this question, 33 interviews with interpreters and interpreter recruiters of that era were conducted, transcribed and analysed.

The findings contribute to the ultimate goal of the author's study, which is to compile a history of interpreting in Estonia. The era from 1991 to the present day will be analysed in further research.

2 Materials and methods

All the material analysed for this article is authentic, consisting of memoirs, interviews and materials from archives and other collections. Doing research on the history of interpreting is “an arduous task for the historian to locate references to the topic in chronicles, letters, autobiographies and literary works” (Pöchhacker 2006: 159). There were very few written sources available to draw upon, as interpreting has been considered quite marginal compared to other professional activities. Other researchers have faced a similar scarcity of sources. As summarized by Pöchhacker (2006), the underlying cause of the problem lies in

the ‘evanescence’ of the activity, which does not leave any tangible trace, and its often low social esteem. For the most part, interpreting was a ‘common’ activity, in several respects, which did not merit special mention. (Pöchhacker 2006: 159).

The ethnographic method applied and materials are to complement each other whereas possible limitations of each type of material are discussed below.

2.1 Memoirs

Data on the years 1918–1940 has been compiled mostly from 14 memoirs of diplomats and officials employed by the Foreign Ministry of Estonia (for example, Jaakson 2011; Kirotar 2007, 2008; Laaman 1998; Pusta 2010; Tamman 2011 and Tomingas 2010). When reading memoirs, the researcher needs to pay close attention to the truthfulness of the events described, using other sources of verification if possible. In memoirs, events tend to be recalled from a subjective point of view as Ivo Juursoo points out in his epilogue to Tomingas’ memoirs (Tomingas 2010: 311).

2.2 Archives and collections

Historic facts and data to confirm or refute the recollections in the memoirs can be discovered in archives. The relevant archives to be consulted in Estonia are the State Archive of Estonia and the Estonian Literary Museum. They have made their collections or parts of it electronically available. For the present article, minutes from the Tartu Peace negotiations with Russia in 1919, preserved in the State Archive of Estonia, provided information on one of the most significant early steps taken by the young Republic of Estonia.

The Analytical Bibliography of Estonian journalism (1821–1944) compiled by the Bibliography Department of the Archival Library at the Estonian Literary Museum yielded several rare pieces of information. For this study, the aim was to look through newspaper articles published in Estonia in 1918–1940 in order to discover whether interpreting or interpreters were mentioned.

Research at the Tartu University photo collection, which contains a comprehensive collection of negatives (1948–1998) from the university photo laboratory, was carried out to discover photos that would depict the use of interpreting. The aim was to establish and confirm when interpreting was first used in Estonia.

2.2 Interviews

For the 1944–1991 period, 33 interviews were conducted; the interviewees were people who acted as interpreters or who were responsible for recruiting interpreters from the 1950s to the 1980s, representing the early years of interpreting. The interviews were realized as open semi-structured interviews, following a general interview guide approach (McNamara 2009), and have been recorded and transcribed. All the interviewees consented to being recorded. The duration of the interviews varied from one to three hours. When preparing for the interviews a basic questionnaire was put together; this was not shown to the respondents but helped to keep the interview on track and to focus on the topic. More specific questions were then asked if anything of interest emerged during the interview.

3 1918 – 1940

How did interpreting start? Was interpreting actually used in 1918–1940, and if so, who were the interpreters? What languages were spoken by Estonia’s first generation of diplomats who had no specific preparation for such a career? Could any of the obscurity surrounding the early interpreters be cleared? The starting point was that interpreters probably were employed in diplomatic relations. Thus, 14 editions of memoirs and diaries by Estonian diplomats and officials from the Foreign Ministry were studied to find references to the use of interpreting. The memoirs allowed the author to reconstruct a history of interpreting. The studied corpus contains fragmented information on foreign languages used, attitudes toward language proficiency and the use of interpreters, as well as diplomats’ recollections of their own experience as interpreters. The majority of the entries in the diaries were written immediately after the interpreting event and give insight into the individual experiences of diplomats. Positive self-evaluation and self-reflection prevail in these fragments.

3.1 Estonians’ language skills in the early 20th century

Preparations to set up the Estonian diplomatic service started in late 1917, several months prior to independence, since securing support for independence from European governments was essential. The only requirement for the diplomats was fluency in two foreign languages.

It is common knowledge in Estonia that educated Estonians in those days spoke “three local languages”: Estonian, German and Russian. Every university graduate was fluent in Russian. In contrast, few Estonians spoke English. Knowledge of Finnish and English – the latter, in particular – was thus a clear asset to aspiring diplomats, while Russian was more or less taken for granted.

As we know, English gained the status of the second official conference language besides French at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Willam Tomingas, who had helped to organize Estonia’s defence forces and later was the secretary of the Tartu Peace delegation, recalls:

Foreign minister Strandmann caught up with me and said: “The situation is difficult both at the frontline and in the rear. There is hope that the British navy could come to help us. The government needs an interpreter to meet and greet the navy. I am aware of merely three men mastering English – missionary Pöhl, Pitka’s son John and you. Be prepared to be on duty at the government office if necessary. It could be in the daytime, it could be at night.” (Tomingas 2010: 70; my translation.)

In Estonia, English became more popular in the 1920s. On 17 August 1926 *Postimees*, an Estonian daily, published an article translated from a German newspaper conveying participants’ impressions of the 18th World Temperance Congress and the 12th Temperance Congress of the Nordic Countries held in Tartu and illustrating Estonians’ language skills:

German was the dominating language at the conference. Unfortunately Anglo-Saxons and speakers of Romance languages were underrepresented. Whenever there was a linguistic issue, Estonians came to the rescue. They are real linguistic artists. Nearly all intellectuals speak Estonian, Russian and German. Many also speak English. (*Postimees* 17.08.1926; my translation.)

3.2 Using Estonian language as a bid for symbolic capital

The newly formed Estonian diplomatic service met its first challenge at the Tartu peace negotiations with Russia. The minutes from the preparation for the negotiations in September 1919 as well as the negotiations themselves in 1919 and 1920 reveal the significance that the recently-proclaimed republic attributed to its official language. Could the use of the Estonian language on the battlefields of Russia be associated with symbolic capital as defined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu? Bourdieu (1997) speaks of capital in different forms: not only of economic capital, but also of cultural, social, and symbolic capitals. Symbolic capital means accumulated prestige or honour. Bourdieu describes the relationship of linguistic capital to the other forms, helping to define the location of an individual within a social space. Expanding Bourdieu’s approach from individuals to states, it could be assumed that it is possible “to reap symbolic benefits” by speaking “with distinction and thereby distinguish[ing] themselves from all those who are less well endowed with linguistic capital” (Bourdieu 1997: 21).

Symbolic power is invisible. Its roots lie in the mutual conviction that even those who have nothing to gain from the arrangement silently recognize it (Bourdieu 1997: 23). Bourdieu stresses two aspects of this invisible power: the right to speak, on the one hand, and the power and authority arising from the communicative situation, on the other hand. In the case of Estonia as a newly independent state, the “right to speak” would in practice mean that the Estonian representative would have the right to use the language of their choice, such as Estonian; if the other party recognized this right, Estonia would gain some symbolic power. The intriguing question is whether or not Estonia made a bid for this invisible power. Evidently it did, given the following statement made by the temporary head of the Estonian delegation Adu Birk at the preparatory meeting to the peace negotiations with Russia:

Birk: “Firstly, allow me to settle a formality: we suggest drawing up the minutes in the languages of our states; i.e., the minutes should be drawn up in two languages.”

Krassin [head of the Russian delegation]: “We can’t, certainly, be against that. We recognize the equality of all languages; thus, both speeches and minutes can be given and drawn up in both languages.” (Minutes 11.09.1919, 12; my translation.)

The members of Estonia’s negotiation team were fluent in Russian but nonetheless spoke Estonian when launching negotiations with Soviet Russia. The power of language to enforce independent statehood was therefore understood from the very beginning. The symbolic capital for the newly born Estonia was to be gained piece by piece. The use of Estonian – the official language in the Republic of Estonia – and the use of interpreting from Estonian to Russian was a significant statement in terms of establishing the Estonian–Russian relationship. In 1919, at the start of the peace conference between the Republic of Estonia and Soviet Russia held in Pskov (Russia), “the head of the Estonian delegation gave his speech in Estonian and informed the Russian delegation that it would receive the text in Russian” (Minutes 11.09.1919: 10; my translation). The minutes record the temporary head of the Estonian delegation Adu Birk as saying to the Russian delegation:

“It is an honour to present our credentials; however, they are in Estonian with an accompanying text in French. We have no text of our credentials in Russian to give to you.” Reads the text of credentials first in Estonian and then in Russian. (Minutes 11.09.1919, 11; my translation.)

French was the language of diplomacy in those years.

Another example of the use of the official language is from the opening of the Tartu Peace Conference with Russia on 5 December 1919. Jaan Poska, head of the Estonian delegation, delivered his speech in Estonian. The secretary of the delegation interpreted it into Russian (Tomingas 2010: 181). However, Poska was, in fact, fluent in Russian: he and his wife of Swedish descent spoke Russian at home (Laaman 1998: 184). Poska thus seems to have made the decision to speak in Estonian to reinforce the state’s symbolic capital. The significance of the chosen language of discourse was also singled out in the press release on the Tartu Peace Conference: “Jaan Poska opened the meeting at 10:35, giving his speech in Estonian ... Leonid Krassin responded in Russian ...” (Press release 1919: 2; my translation).

Most memoirs and diaries contained very scarce information on the use of foreign languages, let alone interpreting. Several diplomats recall single occasions when they acted as interpreters but three of them seem to have interpreted more frequently (Pusta 2010; Tomingas 2010; Kirotar 2007; 2008a; 2008b). Three high-ranking officials are mentioned as having benefited from interpreting:

- Jaan Poska, lawyer, head of the Estonian delegation to the peace negotiations with Soviet Russia (Laaman 1998: 75, 146; Tomingas 2010: 129, 143, 154, 181);
- Konstantin Päts, President of the Republic of Estonia, (Kirotar 2008b: 1834, 1836);
- General Johan Laidoner, Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces (Kirotar 2008a: 215; 2008b: 1840-1841).

All three officials held very high positions and were held in high esteem by the public. They also took part in historic high-level meetings. In the case of Poska, Russian was the target language mentioned; in the case of Laidoner, English, and in the case of Päts, Finnish.

3.3 Experiences of Estonian diplomats acting as interpreters

In addition to the use of Estonian as a bid for symbolic power, diplomats doubled as interpreters for other reasons as well. In his diary, Elmar Kirotar, who held several leading posts in the Foreign Ministry and diplomatic service and who was appointed the first head of the Office of the President in 1936, mentions accompanying General Laidoner on several occasions as an interpreter (Kirotar 2008a: 215; 2008b: 1840–1841). General Laidoner discussed Estonia's war debts with British Treasury officials, including repayment, and also met with Churchill. In 1936 he represented the president of Estonia at the coronation of King George VI.

Laidoner preferred speaking French but could also communicate in English. However, he wished during these visits to speak Estonian and to be interpreted into English, merely because he wanted to reflect briefly on what to say next. (Kirotar 2008b: 1841; my translation.)

The above quote reveals the use of diplomatic interpreting to gain time as Laidoner could speak English.

Fluent in several languages, Kirotar, acting as an interpreter, is critical of Estonia's foreign minister Jaan Lattik who, while attending the League of Nations General Assembly in Geneva in 1930,

did not understand anything because he did not know the language and kept disturbing me following the work of the committees, victimizing the unfortunate secretary who had to help the honourable minister. (Kirotar 2007: 2056; my translation.)

For historical reasons, German was more widely used than English in Estonia. Ernst Jaakson, the longest-serving Estonian diplomat, wrote in his memoirs of the need to improve his English prior to starting work as a secretary at Estonia's honorary consul in San Francisco, CA in 1929 (Jaakson 2011: 26).

3.4 Glimpses into interpreting in newspapers

Apart from memoirs, diaries and archives, newspapers were another important and valuable source. When examining Estonia's leading newspapers from 1918 to 1940, the aim was to discover whether anything had been written about interpreting or interpreters. However, there were few traces of interpretation; for example, an article about a township council having to increase the council secretary's salary to cover his interpreting job. The working language in the council adjacent to the Russian border was Russian, but there were Estonian members who did not always understand Russian and needed interpreting (*Postimees* 20.04.1934). In other words, this is an early example of interpreting in local government. Two articles also mentioned the interpreting of a speech from Polish into Estonian and interpreting from and into Lithuanian for a guest at the University of Tartu (*Postimees* 7.05.1934 and 2.08.1934). In the case of a French

professor who delivered a lecture in French, “summarising interpreting into Estonian was provided” (*Postimees* 7.03.1935). There is also a reference to the university lecturer Villem Ernits who greeted participants in the World Temperance Congress from 25 countries in ten languages (*Postimees* 16.08.1926). The interpreter most frequently mentioned in the newspapers by name – Ernits – was fluent in about thirty languages (Finnish, Polish, Lithuanian, Hungarian, etc.) and was accordingly in great demand.

Despite the overall paucity of information, the newspapers did reveal that Estonians very early learned about the technological innovation that made simultaneous interpreting possible. In 1927, the IBM Hushaphone Filene-Finlay simultaneous translation system, patented in 1926, was used for the first time at the League of Nations meeting (Gaiba 1998). Soon after, in August 1928, *Postimees* published an article describing this modern invention to its readers under the following heading: “A constructive innovation at the League of Nation sessions: it is now possible to interpret speeches into several languages at the same time” (*Postimees* 1928). The article reads:

The American industrialist Edward Filene has devised an apparatus, which enables the automatic interpreting of speech into several languages at the same time. ... Interpreters who could interpret using this apparatus are also being trained. This new mode of interpreting is very simple and not very costly. The interpreters stand in a semicircle around the speaker’s rostrum, each of them interpreting into a different language. (*Postimees* 18.08.1928; my translation.)

4 1944 – 1991

After World War II the linguistic environment in Estonia changed. Russian was introduced as the language of international communication (Lagerspetz 1996; Lauristin et al 1997; Mole 2012). Nine interviewees who had been more active in the first half of the period revealed several fragments of information that are not public knowledge and not known amongst the interpreting community, either.

4.1 Types of interpreting

4.1.1 Simultaneous vs consecutive and whispering

According to the interviews, simultaneous interpreting came to be widely used during the period studied. This is an intriguing discovery since hardly any photographic evidence depicting simultaneous interpreting has survived. Research at the Tartu University photo collection yielded few photos of interpreting scenes; those discovered were mostly of consecutive. Only two photos, taken in 1978, portrayed simultaneous interpreters at work. This outcome was slightly discouraging as the objective behind working through the collection was to find potential early events for which simultaneous interpreting was used. However, it suggests that interpreting was (and often still is) considered a trivial activity and that photos of interpreters were (are) not taken. Nonetheless, the photos marked a breakthrough, for they display the listener’s headset. The simultaneous interpreting equipment was an example of university engineers’ craftsmanship: it had been designed and made at the Tartu University workshop. Several interviewees had referred to the listener’s device as a “soap box”. It functioned as a radio receiver. Not a single device was thought to have survived. However, the collection at

the University of Tartu History Museum contained a damaged “soapbox”, registered as “a wire-tapping device”. It had not been associated with simultaneous interpreting and had not been identified as an early example of a headset.

The interviewees also recalled that whispered interpreting was frequently used if there was just one monolingual member in the audience or a guest present (e.g. at a meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Council or Bar Association).

4.1.2 Government agencies and conferences

The interviews revealed that Estonian–Russian simultaneous interpreting was widely used in meetings, gatherings and events held by various government agencies and state bodies (the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party, the Central Committee of the Estonian Leninist Young Communist League, the ESSR Supreme Council, etc.). According to the interpreters, in some cases they interpreted only from Estonian into Russian and were told (by the audience) not to interpret from Russian into Estonian as everybody present understood Russian. Three interpreters mentioned that they were actually employed as interpreters. One interpreter was employed as an engineer-editor, which, in a way, could be the simultaneous interpreter’s job description. Simultaneous interpreting from Estonian into Russian (and at times also from Russian into Estonian) was used:

- at communist party conferences (e.g. in the Academy of Sciences, Tartu University, etc.);
- at various communist party-initiated informative events;
- at plenary sessions of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party (the second secretary of the Central Committee was a Russian from Moscow who spoke no Estonian);
- at plenary sessions of the ESSR Supreme Council (the Soviet-era equivalent of the parliament).

At present conference interpreting is the term used for the kind of interpreting mentioned in the last paragraph, although according to Pöchhacker (2006: 16), “one could arguably retain the traditional term parliamentary interpreting for conference interpreting as practiced in the Belgian, Canadian or European parliaments”.

Two interviewees mentioned that Russian–Estonian interpreting was sometimes used at party congresses, Supreme Soviet sessions and collective farmers’ conventions in Moscow.

Several interviewees with German and English as source and target language who occasionally interpreted in the 1960s and 1970s mentioned that continuing education or training took them to Leningrad or Moscow University as well as to Moris Torres Foreign Language Institute (Moscow) where they saw, for the first time, how simultaneous interpreters were trained. However, this was a one-off experience that involved no training in simultaneous interpreting.

According to two interviewees, former lecturers at the Tartu University, German and Russian were the languages used at the arguably first international conferences held at Tartu University, which were regional history conferences (1968, 1972, and 1975). The visitors were from other republics of the Soviet Union and East Germany, since it was not allowed to invite foreign guests from other countries. German was thus the obvious language choice for the conference. In 1972 and 1973 conferences for coaches of decathlon and pentathlon athletes and of Olympic gold medallists were held in Estonia. The events brought together top coaches from all over the Soviet Union, as well as a few Swiss and German visitors.

Interpreters from Estonia – native Estonians – were also invited to interpret at a few international events in Moscow and Leningrad. The interpreters recall that their hosts used to say that their “lack of a heavy accent” and fluency in German or English outweighed their accent in Russian. Thus, an interpreter with Russian and German as working languages recalled the 8th International Conference on Extraction of Natural Resources (1968) and the 4th ICOM General Conference (1977) in Leningrad. Invitations to work as interpreters came through contacts established during postgraduate studies at Leningrad University. An assistant professor *emeritus* at the Tartu University recalled that as a student at the two-year English language course in Moscow she had been asked to interpret (for a fee) at the Moscow International Film Festival in 1963. During her studies she had earned pocket money on an hourly basis doing sight translation of scientific texts from English into Russian for students at the Moscow Institute of Fisheries.

4.1.3 Special cases – theatre interpreting

A special type of interpreting worth mentioning in post-war Estonia was the simultaneous interpreting of theatre performances from Estonian into Russian at the Estonian Drama Theatre in Tallinn, which took place for about 60 years. In fact, it was only in 2012 that the staff interpreter of 37 years retired and the tradition was discontinued. Before the restoration of independence all performances were interpreted into Russian, while for the last twenty years, interpreting was only provided for a few select performances each week or month.

4.2 Interpreters: multi-professional language majors

One of the questions asked of the interviewees was “Why did you start interpreting?”. A typical answer was that Estonian students majoring in Russian were simply asked to come and “help out” with their knowledge of Russian. This was the case also with students learning Finnish (Raig 2012: 18). Upon graduation there was no such profession as interpreter that language majors could go into. Almost everybody became a teacher. Until the early nineties, interpreting was a “side-job” or hobby, usually of university lecturers or teachers. The first interpreters had no special preparation and were multi-professionals, as illustrated by the example of Intourist guide-interpreters.

Interpreters from Moscow or Leningrad accompanied the majority of foreign delegations visiting Estonia. Quite often the host institution or company in Estonia would recruit a local interpreter to interpret from or into Estonian (instead of Russian the accompanying interpreters would have used). Most of these local interpreters were from

Intourist, the leading travel agency in the Soviet Union. The Tallinn branch of Intourist had about 50 guide-interpreters on its payroll and also employed about 150–160 free-lance guide-interpreters, a figure confirmed by former Intourist employees interviewed. The job title “guide-interpreter” involved doing sightseeing tours in Tallinn and Estonia for foreign tour groups as well as interpreting during field trips and visits (to collective and state farms, factories, kindergartens, schools, Pioneer Palaces, etc.). The 50 guide-interpreters included about 25 people who spoke Finnish, about ten who spoke English, and another ten who spoke German. There were also one or two who spoke Swedish, Polish, Norwegian and French.

To begin with, the Intourist guide-interpreters were clearly lay or natural interpreters, “bilinguals without special training for the task” (Pöchhacker 2006: 22). However, the diversified work experience combined with the exposure to real-time listening and speaking to native foreigners gradually made them good professionals, and they were regarded as such – bearing witness to Pöchhacker’s (2006: 22) observation: “historically, it is of course difficult to clearly separate professional interpreting from what we might call lay interpreting or natural interpreting”. Quite a few of the Intourist guide-interpreters became simultaneous interpreters at the end of 1980s.

Visits by western visitors were rare in 1944–1991. Among foreign delegations to visit Estonia in this period three were of the highest rank (Medijainen 1993).

1. Urho Kaleva Kekkonen, president of Finland, in 1964. He gave his speech at Tartu University in Estonian (Meri 2000). According to Raig (2012: 20), “The national-romantic speech the president held at the Assembly Hall of the Tartu University has become legendary” (my translation). It was simultaneously interpreted into Russian.
2. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, in 1972. The interpreters for his visit came from Moscow; there were no interpreters who spoke Persian in Estonia.
3. Prime minister of India Indira Gandhi in 1981. An interpreter from the Tallinn branch of Intourist interviewed in this study was recruited to interpret for Rajiv Gandhi, the prime minister’s son.

A significant landmark in the history of interpreting in Estonia was the 1980 Olympic Regatta in Tallinn (the Olympic Games were held in Moscow). Preparing for the Olympics, the first interpreters’ training course in Estonia was held at the Tartu University in 1978. 117 graduates of interpreter training courses passed the Estonian–English–Estonian test successfully and could have worked as interpreters (Tamm 2001). This was when the profession of interpreting was born in Estonia; it was the time of “the interpreter who could use western languages. Until that period only Estonian–Russian–Estonian interpreting was more widely practiced” (Tamm 2001: 7).

To summarize, these findings reveal an intriguing development in the languages used in simultaneous interpreting: until the Olympic Regatta in 1980 the prevailing combination was Estonian–Russian–Estonian, while German–Russian–German was used at international conferences. In the second half of the eighties, English–Estonian–English began to spread as a conference combination in Estonia. The interviews also led to the surprising discovery that simultaneous interpreting was used in state bodies. The interpreters in

this period were mainly part-time multi-professionals recruited on the basis of their language skills: for example, language majors – graduates of Tartu University (Russian, German, English, Finnish) – were asked “to help out” and to act as interpreters, unprepared. Intourist guide-interpreters were the first professional interpreters, although no interpreter training was available until 1978–1979 when preparations for the Tallinn 1980 Olympic Regatta started.

5 Conclusion

This paper is the first study to be carried out on the history of interpreting in Estonia. It increases our knowledge of how interpreting evolved in Estonia. From 1918 to 1940 interpreting was rarely used, and known interpreters were diplomats or university lecturers. The research carried out on this period led to the conclusion that Estonian, the official language in the Republic of Estonia, was used to gain and stress symbolic capital as defined by Bourdieu. It also revealed that Estonian readers could read about a major technical innovation – the simultaneous translation system – soon after it had been introduced and that even language-fluent officials used diplomatic interpreting to gain time for thinking.

During the Soviet years, 1944–1991, Estonian–Russian–Estonian interpreting was used by bodies of power as well as in the theatre. Changes in the use of conference languages can be clearly identified: the German–Russian–German combination was replaced by English–Estonian–English. Estonian became a conference language after the 1980 Olympic Regatta, followed by a remarkable growth in its use after the restoration of independence. Since the mid-eighties English–Estonian and Estonian–English have been prevailing. Research in the archives led to some extraordinary discoveries: a newspaper article describing the first simultaneous interpreting equipment in the world as early as 1928 and a photo of a simultaneous interpreter and the listeners’ unique headset from 1978. The interviews with interpreters have brought to light a number of interesting facts not widely known in Estonia (interpreting used at various party conventions, etc.).

To complete the analytical overview of interpreting in Estonia, more research is needed to cover the period from 1991 to the present day. Once research on all three periods (1918–1940, 1944–1991 and 1991–to the present) is complete, it should yield a comprehensive picture of the history of interpreting in Estonia.

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