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Dragoman revival ?

Conference Interpreting in Turkey: From a rich tradition towards richer prospects

The decision of the EU Council of 17 December 2004 opens the way to Turkey's accession negotiations. Without doubt, this decision will have important implications for the profession of conference interpreting in Turkey. In fact, Turkey comes from a rich tradition of interpreting. During the time of the Ottoman Empire families - if not dynasties - of dragomans (such as the Greek Phanariots of Istanbul) served the Sublime Porte (*), passing on their profession from one generation to the other. In a way that would make many of us (who at times still receive the 'mechanical mouthpiece' treatment) envious today, these interpreter families were granted special rights and privileges, wore special kaftans to symbolize their status, acted as foreign policy advisors and exerted considerable control over the outcome of diplomatic negotiations. In Istanbul, there is a *Tercuman* Mosque dedicated to one of Sultan Suleyman's chief interpreters, Yunus Bey. The Venetians in the 16th Century and the French in the 17th Century trained their dragomans in Istanbul. The dragomans of foreign embassies also enjoyed special rights and immunities, making interpreting a highly privileged profession.

In the modern history of Turkey, the first conference interpreters were trained in 1959 by the Ford Foundation. In the 1960s and 70s, the training of



interpreters was carried out by the Conference Council for Economic and Social Studies in cooperation with the Simulta Corporation. The first interpreters were also quick to organize. Some of the pioneers in this profession founded the Association of Conference Interpreters as early as in 1969.

In 1998, the Association underwent a restructuring process to represent all the conference interpreters adhering to fundamental professional ethics. Today, Birleşik Konferans Tercümanları Derneği (BKTD - The Association of United Conference Interpreters) has 60 members. It advocates the enforcement of the AIIC rules and guidelines in all spheres of interpreting activity from determining work hours to booth standards. Thanks to early professionalization, the Turkish market can be considered fairly well organized, with working conditions and remuneration in line with international standards. With the prospect of closer relations with Europe, many of BKTD's members are now also applying for membership to the AIIC.

University-level programmes in interpreter training were opened in the early 1980s. Today, 13 universities offer programmes in translation and interpreting. A few of them offer training in conference interpreting at undergraduate level with varying infrastructure, human resources and education standards. At Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, which was the first Turkish university to introduce an undergraduate programme in translation and interpreting, and one that this author knows best, connections with the European Commission were established at a very early stage and professional interpreters started teaching right from the start. Through mutual reinforcement of the strengths of practitioners and of the academic environment, and thanks to a stimulating Ph.D. programme in Translation and Interpreting Studies, Boğaziçi University also succeeded in educating a new breed of practitioner-researchers, who are now not only practicing and teaching conference interpreting, but also doing research on it. In line with Turkey's European perspective, Boğaziçi University has also launched a multilingual M.A. program in Conference Interpreting to



address the growing need for interpreters with multiple language combinations. This is a welcome development in view of the fact that previously interpreter training in Turkey had been available only at the undergraduate level and in limited language combinations.

Furthermore, one of the most welcome results of closer relations with the EU is the demand for new language combinations in practice. For long years, the domestic market has favoured some language combinations (such as Turkish and English, German, French, and Russian)

over others. Today, many Turkish interpreters are either adding or planning to add new languages to their repertoires. Equally welcome are the efforts of European colleagues who have already started supplementing their language combinations with Turkish. It was a pleasant surprise to hear colleagues from the Spanish and Dutch booths talking to us in Turkish at a recent meeting.

There is little doubt that Turkey's EU perspective will further improve existing relations. Who knows, perhaps it may even contribute to reviving the glory days of our common predecessors - the dragomans.

For a start, I would not mind seeing a few EU buildings named after interpreters as a tribute to those who have made multilingualism in Europe possible. Would you?

() Sublime Porte: "The seat of Ottoman government became known as the "Sublime Porte" after the gate to the headquarters of the Grand Vizier.*

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