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CREATION OF MECHANISMS OUTSIDE THE EDUCATIONAL
SYSTEM TO CO-OPERATE IN THE ELIMINATION OF
LANGUAGE BARRIERS (TRANSLATION, INTERPRETATION, etc.)

Presented by: Cuban Delegation

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"Translation has to be natural, so it seems
as if the book had been written in that
language, which is how good translations can
be recognized...."

José Martí, Letter to M. Mantilla,

April 9, 1895

I. Introduction

Ever since man, as a social being, first experienced the need to communicate with others, language has been a determining factor in the development of society. Language has been man's device for communicating his experiences, his achievements, his failures, his feelings — the entire range of what he has lived through.

In today's world, however, there is more than one way of communicating. Not all human collectives use the same language, and man must find a common vehicle for carrying his message to others.

This paper seeks to provide a brief rundown of how translation and interpretation has developed in the Republic of Cuba as a mechanism outside the educational system designed to overcome the entropy created by language barriers. Its aim is to offer no more than a panoramic sketch of this activity, which, in a general way, follows the steps taken after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, to train and promote translators and interpreters, as the Cuban Revolution began to broaden its relations with the outside world at an ever-increasing rate.

For reasons of time, we won't discuss here the historical evolution of this important means of communication and understanding among human beings who speak different languages, since that would mean starting thousands of years back, in the time of ancient Egypt, when commercial and diplomatic activity already required the intervention of translators and interpreters, or the subsequent philological research carried out by the Sumerians, Acadians, Chinese, Hindus, Phoenicians, Hebrews, Greeks and Romans and, later, by researchers in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Instead, we will limit ourselves to focusing on the development of this important work in our country, pointing out, in particular, the reasons and needs that led to the creation of a national group of

interpreters and translators with the technical-professional training for handling the scope and seriousness of work in this field.

II. Antecedents

As noted earlier, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution brought about relations between our country and others based on ties of solidarity, friendship and mutual cooperation among the peoples. Our country gradually became a focal point for foreign visitors who wanted to learn about our reality and an active meeting center with a number of practical characteristics that led it to host various international conferences and seminars.

This meant that new needs arose in the field of translation and interpretation — which, since the politicoeconomic dependency of our nation had prevented its development in the pre-revolutionary period, had to be tackled without any previous experience or tradition. Nevertheless, the scope of the task and the people's willingness to take it on generated the necessary mechanisms — at first somewhat spontaneous in nature but with a progressive evolution that eventually, as you will see, led to the creation of a permanent group of translators and interpreters with technical-professional training, tested over the years and now bolstered by long experience in this field.

Forming the initial group was no easy task. It involved an intensive search for trained cadres in various institutions in the country.

The first practical training course for this personnel was organized to deal with the complex task of providing translation and interpretation services for an event that was to have simultaneous sessions of various work commissions in a number of languages; the First Tricontinental Conference.

In addition, paralleling that training of simultaneous interpreters with practice in the booth — without any antecedents either in or outside the educational system — vocabulary lists and documents related to the topics to be discussed in each case (political, economic, scientific, etc.) were studied; there was collective monitoring to

help each translator and interpreter improve as an integral member of a group that aspired to attain a homogeneous nature; and, throughout, there was consistent application of the principle the Cuban Revolution had adopted from Martí, that those who knew more should teach those who knew less.

On the basis of this experience, with a training course prior to each conference, congress or seminar that was held, the collective continued to gain the professional practice needed to provide the quality these sessions required.

Once this technical-professional training had been assimilated, the original group, composed of workers from various centers in the country, worked in other international events following the First Tricontinental Conference (1966). These included the 4th Latin-American Students' Conference (1966), the Conference of the Organization of Latin-American Solidarity (1967) and the Cultural Congress of Havana (1968) -- to mention only a few of the events that provided our interpreters with the best kind of practical experience.

Meanwhile, the Cuban Revolution's ever-greater prestige throughout the world and the development of ties of solidarity with many peoples led to the rapid expansion of our country's international relations, which made it necessary to create a permanent group of specialists in translation and interpretation to handle this task. In 1967, this group was incorporated in the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), in what was then known as the Department of Guides and Congresses, on the basis of the selective process previously mentioned. Throughout this period, the collective provided simultaneous translators for many international events both in Cuba and abroad, including the International Congress of the International Organization of Journalists (in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 1969), the World Peace Council (in the USSR, 1973), the Conference for Compliance with the Paris Agreements on Vietnam (in Sweden, 1974) and the 25th anniversary celebration of the World Peace Council (in France, 1974). It also provided written translations and interpreters for foreign delegations visiting our country.

III. Present Situation

Later, because of the amount of the work to be handled in all these fields, it was essential to proceed to establish not just a department -- which, because of its limited size, could not deal with all the tasks it faced -- but a center that would be composed of a larger permanent collective of technical cadres specializing in a greater number of foreign languages. As a result, the Cuban Center for Translation and Interpretation (ESTI) was established on October 4, 1973, composed at first of the group from the ICAP department.

The present structure of this team of written translators, revisers, typists, delegation interpreter-companions (specialists in two-way and consecutive interpretation), simultaneous interpreters and electronics technicians trained to handle the interpretation equipment -- a team designed to handle all the varied work involved in translation and interpretation -- implies a flexible, dynamic approach in which each of these activities takes place on an independent or complementary basis, as the situation requires. It is now an operational vehicle whose sense of responsibility, good organization and high quality have been recognized by such organizations as the World Peace Council, the Economic Commission for Latin America, the Group of Latin-American and Caribbean Sugar-Exporting Countries, the World Organization of Industrial Ownership, the World Health Organization, the Latin-American Economic System (SELA) and the Special Committee against Apartheid, which it has served both in and outside Cuba.

It should also be noted that ESTI provides written translations and interpreters for delegations working in Spanish, English, French, Russian, German, Portuguese, Italian, Czech, Polish, Bulgarian, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese and Arabic; in simultaneous interpretation, its services include Spanish, Russian, English, French and Portuguese.

Working closely with the Organizing Committee of the 11th World Festival of Youth and Students, the team is now engaged in the important task of training more than a hundred simultaneous interpreters and in locating and selecting written translators and delegation interpreters for the

Festival, which will take place in our country soon. Future plans are directed toward extending this work to the national level.

With this objective in mind, ESTI is now in a phase of expansion aimed at incorporating cadres who meet these requisites. In this effort, it can call on the intermediate and advanced language institutes, which offer courses in 17 languages; the recently created Advanced Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages (ISPLE); and, especially, the University of Havana's School of Philology — also new — whose students are graduated as licenciates in linguistics or in translation and interpretation of English, French, Russian or German.

In line with bilateral cooperation agreements, ESTI has sent groups of interpreters abroad in order to raise the technical-professional level of its personnel.

Nongraduate working translators and interpreters with extensive experience are granted a shorter workday so they may receive complementary academic training at the University of Havana.

IV. Conclusions

All these factors give a clear picture of the evolution of translation and interpretation in our country, conceived as mechanisms outside the educational system and designed to help overcome language barriers. The application of guidelines for increasing the number and raising the quality of our personnel by means of theoretical-practical courses, etc. has been effective both with the initial group that emerged in the early years following the triumph of our Revolution and with ESTI. We are certain that it will be equally effective in the future, leading to a further development of our country's ties with the international community by overcoming the language barriers that exist among peoples and thus acting as a vehicle for unifying them.