

Kadrić, Mira, Rennert, Sylvi, and Schäffner, Christina (2022) *Diplomatic and Political Interpreting Explained*, London and New York: Routledge, 205pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-40923-4 (pbk.) \$46.95.

Unshrouded mysteries reveal missed opportunities?

The world of diplomacy and politics is rather secretive, and with good reason. Interpreting within this world adds another layer of mystery. So many international and public relations developments owe their success to the interpreter's ability to communicate across languages. Yet, the average person continues to confuse the job with its written counterpart, translating!

As this book explores, one imperative task of the interpreter seems to be to impart a certain invisibility or a translucence to the profession – as if words could pass through a clear glass pane and come out on the other side utterly comprehensible in another language. What we learn from this book, however, is that the interpreter's job is much more complex and that the impact of words within the realms of politics and diplomacy is quite frankly enormous. In the introduction *Diplomatic and Political Interpreting Explained* offers a positively comprehensive history of the art of interpreting dating back to Antiquity. Since day dot, we've relied on people to bridge linguistic and cultural distances! Published as recently as 2022, this book offers a unique insight into a ubiquitous yet closed-off world, with real-life examples highlighting the absolute necessity of interpreters for maintaining international relations in the modern age. It was fascinating to read in the introduction, "Politics and Diplomacy Then and Now", that a significant proportion of global cooperation would be functionally impossible without interpreters. Chapter 2 shows how interpreters are often hidden, simply a conduit for communication like a telephone or computer. The book goes into great detail about just how crucial the role of the interpreter is in the world of diplomacy and politics, and how the choices interpreters make directly influence relationships between nations.

Upon first glance, this book seems to offer something for everyone, from the student to the professional interpreter. However, the prescriptive nature of the book and its tendency to explain concepts multiple times in different chapters suggests this may be better suited to the uninitiated and, as stated in the blurb, is most suitable as a teaching resource.

The book has some translating and interpreting heavyweights as co-authors. Mira Kadrić is Professor of Interpreting Studies and Didactics of Translation at the University of Vienna. She has published widely on interpreting in political, diplomatic, court, and public service contexts, interpreting and translating didactics and law and has extensive experience as an interpreter in the above contexts. Sylvi Rennert is a postdoctoral researcher and senior lecturer at the same university. Her research interests are dialogue interpreting, interpreting quality, and didactics. As an interpreter, she has experience working in diplomatic and political, public service, and conference contexts. Finally, Christina Schäffner is Professor Emerita at Aston University, Birmingham. Her main research interests are political discourse in translation and interpreting, news translation, metaphor in translation, and translation didactics, and she has published widely on these topics.

In his introduction, Austrian diplomat Peter Krois provides a colourful overview of the historical development of diplomacy and gives an informative description of the current situation of international politics and relations. Krois has extensive professional experience, having been posted in Warsaw, Prishtina, and Berlin before becoming Head of the Unit for EU Institutions at the Foreign Ministry in Austria. According to the Austrian Embassy, “[b]etween autumn 2015 and end of August 2021 he was the Austrian Delegate for North Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf Region at the Austrian Permanent Representation to the EU. On 30 August 2021, he started his new assignment as Austrian Head of Mission for Syria.”¹ He outlines the history of global relations and the different organisations that contribute to it in great detail, likely because he has first-hand experience in various capacities across many nations. While Krois paints a rather massive picture of the current diplomatic landscape from its formation in the early 20th century to today, he does so to pinpoint exactly where the role of interpreting sits within this global context, further highlighting its importance to the cause. I found his introduction most interesting, though he had the relatively privileged task of spelling out a comprehensive history of interpreting across cultures, which is both fascinating and necessary to give the book a solid foundation.

The book has already been met with endorsement, and Jesus Baigorri-Jalon from the University of Salamanca, Spain, writes on the book’s website that it is “[a] pleasure to read (not only for those interested in interpreting and linguistics but also for diplomats and politicians).” This last

¹ <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/oeb-damaskus/ueber-uns/der-botschafter/>

statement provides a crucial detail – *Diplomatic and Political Interpreting Explained* covers much more than the title indicates. Beyond the foundations of interpreting in political and diplomatic contexts, the book delves into the histories and complexities of international relations, albeit erring on the side of density. One may be forgiven for becoming quite lost by Chapter 3: Communication between conventions and creativity, where diplomatic protocol, conventions of interpreting, and political speeches converge, creating multiple learning streams simultaneously.

Diplomatic and Political Interpreting Explained is indeed a fantastic teaching source – particularly because of the wonderful study exercises at the end of each chapter. One of my favourite tasks at the end of Chapter 4: Managing Information reads, “We have seen that interpreters, politicians, and diplomats may have different opinions as to the use of explicitation, modification, reduction, and interposition. Reflect on potential reasons for such differences” (74). By encouraging students to read additional material and to look outside of the cultural confines of their chosen language pair, these questions make for a more rounded understanding by enabling the reader to add what is fundamentally explained in the book to the literature surrounding it. These questions, along with references and book recommendations at the end of each chapter, show a real quality in scholarship, as the authors are very much cognisant of which questions will best complement what is explored in each chapter.

However, a few criticisms of this book come to mind, and their impact on the reader is worth highlighting. For one, the book utilises almost zero non-Western examples; situations that explore the fundamentals of interpreting in diplomatic and political contexts are mostly Euro-centric, which renders some parts of this book quite unhelpful for students with language pairs outside of the European language space (though one or two examples of ‘distant’ languages such as Japanese or Chinese are featured). I found this rather disappointing, as the book claims it is “not only an essential textbook for students and educators of interpreting but will also be of interest to professional interpreters and students and scholars of politics and international relations” (ii). This seems to be addressed to an extensive readership but in fact caters mainly to those with European language pairs.

Furthermore, the preface makes special mention that this newer English edition is an adaptation of the original German-language manual *Dolmetschen in Politik und Diplomatie* (2018) and that 14 new interviews had been added to “adapt to the needs of an international audience” (x).

Elsewhere in the preface, the book states, “We hope that the characteristic features of interpreting in political and diplomatic settings addressed [...] can serve as input and inspiration for any language pair students are working with” (xii). This statement might have held more weight if it wasn’t mentioned elsewhere in the book that non-Western interactions, in particular, are codified and have their ways of conducting diplomacy that may differ from the West; “These differences can lead to misunderstandings in intercultural encounters, especially if one uses one’s own culture as a benchmark or views another culture through its lens” (74). Indeed, some examples from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, or even South America would have been most welcome instead of a reductive statement about how “Diplomatic protocol [...] is only noticed in the event of mishaps or violations of protocol” (23). This quote was given in relation to a mistake by Singapore’s Prime Minister (who isn’t even named in the book) when received by then German Chancellor Angela Merkel. When talking about international relations and diplomacy, it would be helpful, in my opinion, to cater to students and professionals outside of the Western language sphere or to include an acknowledgement of certain limitations of the book in this regard.

It is also difficult at times to tell whether the book intends to be prescriptive and didactic or scholarly and argumentative, which results in some very dense walls of text against rather sparse, sweeping statements, leaving the reader to follow or use their understanding of the topic to fill in the gaps. For example, Chapter 2.4: Language and communicative behaviour begins with “Communication defines humans and their social relationships. Language transports information and emotion and can have a unifying or dividing power” (30). After a dense 14 lines of text delving into the technicalities of this statement, the book claims, “The objective of communication is to influence thinking and action in certain social relationships” (30). While the statements contradict each other, I was also left wanting an extrapolation on the final sweeping statement just mentioned. “*Surely, they don’t mean this is the only objective when it comes to communication!*” I silently argued with the pages as I read. Reductive statements like the one above impacted my impression of the book most significantly.

Another example where a sweeping statement is made, followed by another statement that contradicts the former entirely, can be found in Chapter 3.6: Precision and meaning. It begins with “The principle aim of interpreting is always to be as accurate as possible” (62). Then, a few lines down, we read, “By taking into account the cultural aspects of language and behaviour in the interpreting process, the interpreter creates a cultural bridge and a product that

is tailored to its recipients” (62). These contrasting statements display a dichotomy in approach to interpreting à la Nida (1969), whereby formal (source-text oriented) and dynamic (target-text oriented) approaches elicit different results. These contradictions are not only confusing within the broader context of word-choice while interpreting – they also distract the reader from the more helpful, educational, and wonderfully reflective statements, which can be found in this book in equal amounts.

Diplomatic and Political Interpreting Explained accepted the mammoth task of communicating the history of diplomatic and political interpreting and, for all the missed opportunities to include non-Western sources and examples, did a pretty good job of it, too! The final sentences in Chapter 7.3: Interpreting in a changing landscape take stock of recent developments in this field, pointing to the future with a genuinely optimistic outlook. The concluding passage of this book sums up its intention quite well, “Political and diplomatic interpreting is done in service of a cause. The strength of interpreters in the performance of their duties is based on their competence, their autonomy, their independence and, above all, their multi-partiality” (182). If we pare back the complicated passages that get stuck on the minute details (easily done in the world of diplomacy!), the essential message of this book lies in this quote.

If I were to write this book off purely because it doesn’t cater to a broader range of language pairs and cultures, I’d be missing out on a golden opportunity for a glimpse into the often secretive and concealed world of diplomacy and politics and the rewarding, impactful and quietly brilliant profession that is interpreting in these contexts. So, my recommendation is: read this book, complete the tasks, recognise the information gaps, explore these gaps, and fill them for yourself. There aren’t many, and as a guiding manual, *Diplomatic and Political Interpreting Explained* is an excellent companion to anyone’s interest in the field.

Stephanie Winter

The University of Western Australia

22228451@student.uwa.edu.au