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THE REAL WORD WIZARDS — THE U.N. INTERPRETERS

With great speed, fabulous accuracy and no little eloquence, they speak for the statesmen.

Debating world problems at the Palais de Chaillot here with leading diplomats of the Unites Nations General Assembly is 32-year-old José Baquero of Ecuador, who only a few months ago was a $77-a-week translator employed by the peace organization.

The story of Señor Baquero has all the appearance of a rags-to-riches dream came true, for as Quito's permanent delegate he keeps company now with Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers and other top-drawer envoys of the world. To his 2,900 ex-fellow workers in the United Nations Secretariat , however, Señor Baquero's lightning progress is no Cinderella story.

Like many of the U.N.'s language experts, he put in a number of years in governmental and professional service before joining the world peace organization as an employee. There are so many doctors, writers, philosophers and other talented employees working as linguists that few eyebrows rise when somebody leaves for a very important post. Señor Baquero's case is unique primarily because he is a star example of what the crack language corps can produce.

The U.N. linguists are a highly talented company and here, sitting in the converted orchestra pit and stalls of the big auditorium, they are one of the stellar attractions. Parisians are getting their first look at the complex language operation which fascinated New Yorkers at Flushing Meadow and Lake Success and they are displaying equal enthusiasm for twirling the tiny dials of their plastic receivers to tune in one of the five official languages–or all five in turn.

A measure of the linguists' importance in the smooth functioning as the Assembly is the fact that the 201 of them brought to Paris represent 75 per cent of the language section's permanent staff at Lake Success, whereas the whole group of the Secretariat now employed in Paris represents only about one-sixth of the New York's regular complement.

The jobs of the language experts fall into three clearly defines categories.

The interpreters put the spoken words of delegates into other tongues–either "simultaneously," so that audiences may follow a speech as it is being given, or

"consecutively," giving the whole speech when it is finished. The verbatim reporters take down what delegates say–or, frequently, what they mean to say–for the permanent record. Behind the scenes, the translators transcribe documents into languages other than the original.

To interpret, record, print and generally process a single hour's speech requires at least 380 hours of toil in thirty-five different job classifications. But it is the language adepts who have the pivotal task; they are, therefore, treated like prima donnas by other Secretariat members and often by the delegates as well. None knows better than the diplomats that in any international discussion it is a diplomat's oratorical skill *plus* an interpreter's talent that determines how well delegates understand one another.

As one official put it, "It's not always what a diplomat says that it is important, but rather what an interpreter says he says."

Most people who visit the United Nations here in the Palais–or at Lake Success–are probably lured by visions of a first-class diplomatic battle, but soon they become so attentive to the remarkable performances in the interpreters pit that they tend to ignore the delegates.

Perhaps the most dazzling performance is put on by the consecutive interpreters, who never fall to evoke awed whispering in the public galleries. Some of the interpreters have been known to listen to a delegate for more than an hour without taking a note, arise when the delegate stops speaking and proceed to rattle of the whole speech–entirely from memory, in another language and without neglecting subtle nuances.

These interpreters are the masters of a craft guild in which even the least proficient is something of a phenomenon. In the interpreters case, a brilliant memory is standard equipment; shorthand is prohibited because it is not quick enough to keep pace with diplomatic arguments. The interpreter is aided, however, by a rather special brand of individualized note-taking designed to jog his memory at strategic points. Theoretically, interpreters are supposed to write their notes in the language into which the speech is to be put, and many do. In most cases, however, interpreters think so naturally in so many languages that their notes are more likely to be a conglomeration of different tongues,

much-abbreviated abbreviations and assorted hieroglyphics. Even the arrangement of the notes on paper has special significance, for the "structure" of the notes tends to reflect the structure of the delegate’s sentences.

An example of the way the interpreters work is the method of Nicolas Teslenko, a 35-year-old Frenchman who is expert in Russian, English and French. Teslenko takes skeletonized notes in the language to which he is listening at the moment. (The exception is Russian, which is too complicated to transcribe quickly from abbreviations or headlines.) Assigned to cover Alexandre Parodi of France, he will take down the main parts of the Parodi talk in French, but deliver his interpretation aloud in English.

There are about seventy interpreters in the United Nations, and they are all Jacks of many skills. They need the finesse and presence of a diplomat, for they perform duties under the gaze of delegates and visitors. They must be fine orators, for they are obliged to mirror accurately each of the various styles of speech-making. (Radio audiences have been impressed by the super-charged eloquence of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Y. Vishinsky when what they have been hearing an inspired imitation of the fiery Moscow prosecutor done in English by George Sherry, graduate of the College of the City of New York.)

Furthermore, interpreters often are as well versed as the delegates in whatever subject is under debate–international control of atomic energy, the Dutch blockade of Indonesia or interpretations of the Charter. They have to be, for some of the delegates have a way of getting tangled up in what they mean to say, and it is up to the interpreter to rescue them and make sense.

Naturally, they do not dare make substantive changes, which has been unfortunate at times for some of the delegates. For example, there was the day when United States Delegate Warren R. Austin made a moving appeal before the Security Council calling upon the Jews and Arabs to settle the Palestine problem in "true Christian spirit." The interpreter looked up incredulously, but steeled himself against correcting the blunder, and it was not until some time later that one of the American aides discovered the error and raced back to the verbatim reporter’s cubicles to keep the blunder out of the official

records at least.

Sometimes the delegates slough their words so badly that the finished product after interpretation and recording is hilarious. A classic instance is the reference in the permanent records to "professional gals abroad at night," when what Australia's Dr. Herbert V. Evatt actually said was "professional ghouls," only he pronounced it "gowls" in his heavy Down-Under manner. The recorder could only think of "gals."

Probably the happiest mistake made in the language corps was committed by 26-year-old Robert J. Bernstein. Bernstein was a new man on big committee assignments, and on his first day interpreting Russian for the very exacting Mr. Gromyko he was so rattled that he translated the Soviet delegate's phrase into "general regulation and reduction of arguments." The word-weary diplomats burst into applause, and when Bernstein completed the job with no more accidents Mr. Gromyko offered the first praise he had ever given.

Esprit de corps is high among the language experts. The leading case in the linguists' book concerns the conduct of Jean Back and Andre Kaminker. After a ten-hour day of procedural wrangling in a Human Rights subcommittee session in New York, they hurried out to dinner with their current feminine favorites. In a sub-pavement bistro in Manhattan, which they did not reach until 10 P.M., the proprietor obligingly put Tournedos a la Bearnaise on the fire, wax tapers were lighted, and WQXR was tuned softly to a concert. Just as the foursome settled back to cocktails the radio switched to the Economic and Social Council, still in session after twelve hours of debate. Before a minute had elapsed, MM. Back and Kaminker had paid the check, bade farewell to their dumfounded companions and were on the way to relieve their exhausted fellow interpreters.

Boredom is one factor that wears out the interpreters. As one of them observes wryly: "We have interpreted the same stuff so often that some of us think United Nations debates should be conducted the way you can play chess. When the Palestine debate begins again, say, Sir Alexander Cadogan of Britain could start the day by saying 'I play 375 C' which would be the speech he made when the problem first came before us. Then Faris el-Khouri of Syria could counter by a 'move with 29 B,' one of his old speeches.

And so on. It would eliminate needles wear and tear on our tongues and are relieved for forty minutes to transcribe their notes."

A major headache for the reporters is Mr. Vishinsky, who talks at the rate of 240 words a minute. Sometimes delegates hand out advance texts of their talk to make transcribing easier, but Mr. Vishinsky is notoriously unable to stick to his texts for more than about two sentences at a stretch.

Many of the veteran language experts–particularly those who have served the League of Nations–fell that the oratory at the United Nations is not as thrilling as some they have heard. They recall colorful, impassioned speeches in their own national parliaments, and they point out that even in the League of Nations there was considerably more fire on the podium.

Today, they observe, everybody knows what everybody else is going to say. It seems to be tacitly conceded that all the Assembly talk in the world will change few minds, they’re so immovably set. The comment of Dr. Oswaldo Aranha of Brazil to the General Assembly is often cited. Dr. Aranha advised that their arguments might, indeed, change some minds but would certainly change no votes.

All of which, coming from experts in the ringside seats, may be a tragic indication of what most of the world thinks about international bodies. But the interpreters, many of whom left better paying jobs in their countries’ parliaments to serve the Unites Nations, are still hoping.

In the words of one of them: "The world despairs, and so do we. And there’s no arguing that we’re mighty tired of all the talk, all the disputes. But now and then, whenever we get low in spirits and especially discouraged, we ask each other–‘ what if the Nations decided to stop talking?’"

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