

**Elsa B. Endrst**

## **INTERPRETERS: INSIDE THE GLASS BOOTH**

In describing the complexities of his demanding, often stressful profession, UN Russian interpreter Preter Pyotr Avaliani said: "Simultaneous interpretation is like driving a car that has a steering wheel but no brakes and no reverse."

He is one of 142 remarkable linguists from 22 nations who interpret multilingual deliberations-meetings which could not take place without them-at UN Headquarters in New York and elsewhere throughout the world.

Seated in individual soundproof glass booths situated inside the meeting rooms, these men and women orally translate speeches being delivered on the floor of the hall at that very moment. It is no easy feat.

The following informal aptitude test has been suggested for this arduous job: Sit by your TV and try to repeat everything an announcer says while he is speaking. After a sentence or two, you may become confused, because you cannot remember what the announcer has just said. But you cannot forget what you yourself have just repeated. Then, pause for a moment and imagine that you would have had to translate all this immediately-into another language.

States one interpreter: "The basis of simultaneous interpretation is 'remember and forget, remember and forget'."

Monique Corvington, Chief of the UN Interpretation Service, has described the professional skills and personal qualities essential for the sensitive and demanding job: a thorough knowledge of at least three of the UN working languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish); a curious mind; a thirst for knowledge; and the ability to concentrate.

Simultaneous interpretation had its origin at the post Second World War Nazi war crime trials in Nuremberg. Because it saved time and improved the quality of the output, UN officials decided to use simultaneous rather than consecutive interpretation, which had been used at the League of Nations. In consecutive translation, the speaker stops periodically, so that the interpreter can translate what has just been said.

### **Challenges, lonely**

The professional life of UN interpreters is both challenging and lonely, although they work in teams of two. By its very physical nature, it cuts them off from other UN staff, as well as delegations.

"The actual work is very individual. You perform the service all by yourself", says Ms. Corvington. "Because of the intense concentration required, interpreters work in teams of two in a booth, taking turns at the microphone, usually for 30-minute periods. Hence sometimes, to avoid cutting off a speaker, they may be required to go on much longer."

During the General Assembly's general debate, when many Heads of State speak, one interpreter is assigned to each speaker. Each may go on as long as 35 minutes to one hour.

"If it goes longer than that, you lose concentration and speed and you lose ground. It's like drowning. The tendency is to be very enthusiastic and hang on, to see it through to the end, but your colleague will soon signal that you're beginning to talk a lot of nonsense and it is time to switch over the mike to him", Ms. Corvington observes.

### **Linguistic gymnastics**

In order to brief themselves for their daily "mental linguistic gymnastics", interpreters read UN documents and reports related to their work. A good delivery and a solid understanding of the subject matter at hand is of utmost importance.

There is a difference of opinion as to whether interpreters should maintain a flat, unemotional tone of voice, regardless of what is being said. Arabic interpreter Walid Skaf believes that "you have to Put yourself in the shoes of the speaker to a large extent and express his emotions, as well as the message".

Cultural differences also affect an interpreter's work. For example, there is an Arabic expression which literally translates as: "This is a word of truth." Yet the phrase is used to describe things which are not truthful. Chinese delegates are known to enjoy quoting proverbs or sayings, which are often difficult to render into another language. The frequently heard expression "four seas indicate the world" can loosely be interpreted as universal"; the meaning of "walking dog" can be translated into "stooge" or government puppet".

### **Something innocuous**

You have to be very careful of using direct language and when in doubt, "say something innocuous until you establish the meaning of the sentence", observes Sylvia Maginnis, Chief of the Spanish Interpretation Section.

Mr. Skaf believes that a good interpreter must also be able to transfer a message coherently, not only into another language, but into another cultural context.

Also, he notes, an interpreter must always be fair. "You have to be able to service everyone, regardless of your own opinions, especially in the political context."

Chinese interpreter Jeffrey Tao sees intellectual curiosity as a major attribute of the profession. A good interpreter must want to understand and know more about many fields that seem obscure, abstruse and technical, but which, after some exposure, may become extraordinarily interesting", he said.

Language changes, usually dictated by the evolution of words and terms emerging from new fields and subjects covered by the various UN agencies, have most affected the work of

interpreters over the years. "All of us speak a little bit of a different language than our predecessors did", says Mr. Avaliani.

"In my case, I must compromise between a good literary Russian and 'UN-ese', as it is called-that is, the specific vocabulary of the UN, understood by all delegates. And sometimes good structure or word order is sacrificed, to be more clearly understood."

And there is the problem sometimes of a speaker's own words. "If the speaker's English is weak, it is difficult to do a good job as an interpreter", he notes.

In the early days of simultaneous interpretation, speakers often made a special effort to be more understandable, to speak a little more clearly or at a reasonable speed. Today that is not always the case.

Some also feel the profession has moved away from the polished literary speeches of great orators. "We're moving into a technological age. The topics of meetings have changed. We're covering such a wide range of subjects these days." Ms. Corvington mused, "Are we becoming too practical?"

### Uneasy moments

Now retired, George Li, one of the first UN interpreters, recalled some uneasy moments while translating into Chinese the words of Krishna Menon, the articulate, often provocative Indian leader. "His mind would move quickly from one thought to another, branching off from the main theme. He could go on and on, never to return to his original topic", said Mr. Li.

Abba Eban, Foreign Minister of Israel in the late 1960s and 1970s, he said, was "a brilliant speaker, rich in big elaborate words, who spoke like written English prose". That, said Mr. Li, made it difficult for any interpreter to do him justice.

Strange as it may seem, these "great communicators" generally agree that an inherent part of their profession is a constant dissatisfaction with themselves, "so you keep trying to get better and better", says Chief Corvington with firm conviction. An admirable goal for all at the world Organization.

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