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The Interpreter: Linguist Plus Diplomat

The disappearance of a universal language of diplomacy makes him the indispensable man at today's conferences. The good ones are towers of strength in Babel.

AT international conferences nowadays the most urgent business never appears on the agenda. That's the task of turning what is said into another language with a maximum of accuracy and a minimum of delay. It is a ticklish job, as we shall see–even when all sides strain to be understood–and quite a few officials close to it feel that it doesn't get the wide appreciation it deserves.

"We are too inclined to think interpreters are something you pick up on the street in Rome or Tangier at a dime a dozen," complained a State Department man the other day between trips to the summit and current Geneva sessions. "The idea is that anybody who seems to know two languages will do." Another State Department veteran insists that the Russians have, in fact, sent interpreters to Big Four meetings who performed so poorly that "we wouldn't use them to take somebody to a railroad station." But this is unusual, even tough it is generally held among diplomatic language experts that there are no more than 120 fully qualified conference interpreters in the world–which makes them scarcely less rare than whooping cranes (26).

THESE exceptional people have been known to start work at 10 A.M. and go on, with short breaks for lunch and supper, until 8 A.M. the next day, then go home take a sleeping pill and alarm their wives by interpreting in their sleep. Often they feel strongly that they make better speeches than the ones they heard in the first place.

"You do an editing job as you go along, "explains one of the sixty-five conference interpreters employed by the U.N., which rents some of them out for important non-U.N. meetings. "You must be absolutely faithful to what the delegate is trying to convey. You keep up with him but you also try to make things clear where they are muddy. Sometimes

you translate exactly what he says and then add a few words to explain what he means. You lose time that way, but you gain it back by cutting out the padding he puts in to give himself time to think. Stuff like "for instance," and "it is the opinion of my delegation," and so forth."

Top-notch interpreters are so much at home in two cultures that they can, figuratively, soar above purely literal translation. Let a well- read Russian cite an animal story by Krylov and they'll be ready with a similar fable from Aesop. Not long ago a quotation from Pushkin's " Boris Godunov" about 'a vision of blood-spattered boys before my eyes," immediately brought forth a Shakespeare passage: Macbeth talking about his blood-stained hand which will "the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red." When it is appropriate, a versatile interpreter will also manage to convey a folksy flavor. Recently, the Soviet Minister of Agriculture, trying to make friends in the National Press Club, was served so well by a State Department linguist from Brooklyn that some listeners said the Russian sounded like a visiting Rotarian, and might get himself elected to the Senate if he stayed around long enough. Old-timers in the game recall Hitler's personal interpreter, whose English, it was once said, had the most refined Oxford accent plus all the marks of Hitler's vulgarity, which made it interpreting of the highest excellence.

BUT even these acknowledged word wizards err, and not merely with slips of the tongue like "a pact of mutual non-assistance and aggression," or the classic confusion of "reduction of armaments" with "reduction of argument". Here are some recent mix-ups, from the ridiculous to the regrettable:

A Soviet delegate, talking fast in a disarmament debate, mentions "Hazel." In Russian, "h", is pronounced like "g" and the interpreters unaware that a hurricane is meant, turn Hazel into "gazelle" (English) and "antelope" (French). Everybody is mystified.

At a U.N. discussion of an underdeveloped country, the American speaker detects progress in the increase of privies there. The man putting this sentence into French doesn't know what privies are. He translates "private law." A colleague spots the blunder and hastily passes a note "W.C." The first interpreter nods. "You run along," he writes back. "I'll be alright."

A Soviet interpreter turns "the puppet regime of Chiang Kai-shek" into "Chang Kai-shek's scarecrow regime." He finds himself retired.

A French delegation puts a paragraph number on a discussion item which accidentally differs from the number on the corresponding item in the English version. The interpreter should notice this switch and say, "As it is stated in paragraph four of the French text, which is paragraph five in the English text ***" Instead, he simply translates the number he hears. The British delegate finds that paragraph four doesn't say what he hears the Frenchman say it says, and there follow twenty minutes of misunderstanding, with annoyance all around.

AN American interpreter, expected to translate some pretty insulting French language

into English, mistakenly repeats it all in French. As the French delegate hears his abuse rendered verbatim, he repents and takes it all back. This interpreter admits that he now finds such seemingly involuntary lapses a fine way to cool down delegate's tempers.

An American delegate suggests that the preamble to a proposed agreement contain the words "expanding economy." The Soviet delegate reacts violently. The explanation is that in Russian "expanding economy" becomes " rasshir-yayushchiyasya ekonomiya," and carries the idea that the economy is self-expanding. This flies in the face of Marxist writ, which views Western economy as self-contracting, and so the Russian sees red.

At one of the early Big Four meetings Molotov makes a suggestion, which properly turns up in French as "nous demandons," meaning "we propose" or, at most, "we request." But a sloppy translation from the French into English makes it a strong "we demand." Everybody is upset.

THE men who arrange the machinery for international meetings are well aware, of these pitfalls, and try hard to guard against them. Each major conference has its own secretariat, with interpreters and translators drawn from the participating nations, the United Nations and a small group of freelances.

"It's like a picnic—everybody contributes something," says Robert A. Conrads, the State Department's Chief of Language Services. (He's in charge of language matters at the present Geneva meeting, serving under a Russian secretary general. At the summit talks the secretary general was a Briton, the chief language officer a Frenchman.)

The rules for interpreting are set anew before each conference, but in general they stick pretty to the "Berlin system," first used at the Big Four meeting there last year.

UNDER this system, while a Russian is speaking, his words are "simultaneously" translated into English and French, to be listened to with earphones. When he's trough, his speech is "consecutively" turned into one Western language—say, French; that translation is "simultaneously" translated, too—in this case, into English. Thus an American listener hears two different translations of the Russian speech and is in a position to spot a discrepancy between the one directly from the original and the following one from French.

Each delegation has its own language experts, listening to speeches and from time to time taking notes. Often at Secretary Dulles' elbow sits Charles E. Bohlen, our Ambassador to Moscow, who knows Russian as well as any other American. Always with the French is the dapper Constantin Andronikov, highly articulate in Russian, French and English. With the Soviet delegate is capable, partly American-educated Oleg A' Troyanovsky. The British have been switching interpreters around a bit.

Carefully watched, too, are the translations of documents prepared by the secretariat and the delegations themselves. At Berlin in 1954 Ambassador Bohlen spotted two

seemingly small discrepancies in a proposed security treaty offered by the Soviets in Russian and English.

An "of" in the Russian text appeared as "in" in the English version, and cast an entirely different light on the conditions under which the United States could have sent troops back into a demilitarized Germany.

Then, in the English version, signatories were prohibited from "entering" any other alliance having conflicting aims. In the valid Russian text, however, they were prohibited from "participating" in any such alliance. The significance of this was that, under the English text, we could have remained in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (since we were already in it, and so we wouldn't be entering it), where as the Russian text would have committed us to abandon N.A.T.O. (since we were contracting not to participate in it)

Molotov apologized about this the next day, and Bohlen has since said that he's sure these discrepancies weren't intentional. Also unintended was what looks like the most deadly mistranslation in history.

ON July 26, 1945, the Potsdam Declaration urged Japan to surrender. Thereupon the Japanese cabinet agreed that it was time to make peace, and on July 28 Premier Suzuki announced a policy of "mokusatsu."

This unfortunate word has no exact counterpart in English. Its approximate meaning is "to withhold comment," but it also means "to ignore." The Domei News Agency at once broadcast in English that the Cabinet had decided to ignore the Potsdam ultimatum.

After the atomic bombs had been dropped, President Truman cited the Japanese rejection of the ultimatum as a reason. Convincing evidence available since then shows that the Premier had indeed meant to convey "no comment," with the implication that a significant announcement would come later. Connoisseurs of the if's of history say that the right translation could have brought quick peace without atomic explosions. The right translation might also have kept the Soviets from entering the war against Japan at the last minute and thereby gaining new strength in Asia.

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GENESIS says that at Babel the Lord did confound the language of all the earth, but in diplomacy, at least, there have been long periods where there was a universal language in the West. First it was Latin, in which every major treaty was written until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Then, more and more, it was French; some Russian and Prussian officials even wrote interoffice memos in it. French stayed supreme until Versailles when it began to share equal official status with English. One reason was that neither Llyod George nor Wilson knew French very well.

Loss of a truly international diplomatic language may have subtly affected the thinking of many diplomats. Symptomatic is this fragment from a Security Council debate which, linguists say, couldn't have been improved upon from an interpreter's point of view. Apropos of an item on the agenda, an Australian speaking English, says, "I assume." As translated for the president of the council, a Belgian speaking French, this becomes " I deduce." The Russian gets it as "I consider."

ALL of which is a clue to a basic difference in thought patterns which has long been suspected by academicians and is now being closely investigated by Edmund S. Glenn, the scholarly chief interpreter of the State Department, with the help of a Rockefeller Foundation grant. After wadding trough masses of translations of diplomatic verbiage, Mr. Glenn has reached some tentative conclusions too complicated to detail here. The following is a simplified outline:

The English pattern is pragmatic, inductive: If you speak of a cat, you speak of a particular cat, and if you speak of cats in general, you leave room for exceptions. You say, let's look at various cats and not generalize–or at most, cats are like that more or less.

The French pattern is deductive: Let's look at various cats so that we can generalize. Observation of various cats shows us the true nation of cattiness. Cats are like that, period.

The Russian pattern, alas, is intuitional: Let's grasp the correct feeling of cattiness on the basis of the ideas we have in our soul. Let's look at any cats that don't fit.

An inkling of what this can mean in everyday international politics appears in this further analysis of Security Council talk.

The Australian delegate speaks of the need to investigate "the situation which is before us." In French, this becomes "qui nous est soumise"–literally, "which is submitted to us," implying that the Council has authority over the situation. In Russian, it is "rassmatrivayemym nami," carrying the connotation of "this situation which is being taken apart," or "in regard to which the precise category into which it falls has to be determined."

Thus, while the Australian simply says, let's look this over, the Russian feels it's already decided; in his mind, once the "correct" diagnosis is made, the "correct" action follows more or less automatically. The idea of compromise–that there can be two sides to a question–seems to him either spineless or hypocritical.

After isolating twenty similar instances at the same meeting, Mr. Glenn notes that "the purely linguistic problem was solved superbly, but the degree of communication between the Russian and English-speaking delegated appear to be nil."

NEED it always be so? Demonstrably no. At the recent Atoms-for-Peace conference in Geneva, scientists from seventy-three countries–aided by interpreters with hurriedly acquired scientific vocabularies–communicated extremely well. Perhaps physics have a way of understanding each other so long as they stick to physics. One Russian interpreter,

however, ran into a little trouble. Showing slides he would say, "This is a big, big–next slide!" Then, "This is a small, small–next slide!" Nobody paid much attention to him.

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