

Diary

Lynn Visson

It's happening again. The chairman has called on the distinguished representative of France. But what I'm hearing through a thick curtain of electrical hiss and crackle in the headphones sounds vaguely like Dutch. Can't make out a single word. Total panic. My hands grasp the microphone stem. It's oddly soft and squishy. That's because it's not a microphone. Clutching the pillow, I wake up with a start from this classic simultaneous interpreter nightmare.

I worked as a staff interpreter at the UN for 25 years, trying to convert the knots and twists of Russian and French sentences into intelligible and, I hope, fluent English; I've also translated books and articles. On the one hand, 'You talk – I talk'; on the other, 'You write – I write.' The translator has time to change, edit and refine his text. He also has a desk, entire shelves full of dictionaries, a computer and a telephone. How can you compare the life of this coddled creature with the lot of the miserable, pressured interpreter who has only the words and phrases stored in his brain to rely on?

Interpreters usually work in pairs but when we're actually interpreting we're on our own, hidden away from the audience

inside soundproof 'booths', claustrophobically small cubicles containing two chairs, two consoles, two headsets, two microphones, and a window that provides an excellent view of the backs of the delegates' heads and of the podium at the front of the room. The booths are marked with the name of the target language: English-booth interpreters interpret into English, French-booth interpreters into French.

The six booths correspond to the UN's six official languages: English, French, Russian, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic. International organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund also use these languages at their conferences. But the most important language in most international organisations has no name: it is the institution's own bureaucratese, its linguistic Esperanto. We never *do* something, we *implement*. We don't *repeat*, we *reiterate* and *underscore*. We are never *happy*, we are *gratified* or *satisfied*. You are never *doing a great job*: you are *performing your duties in the outstanding manner in which you have always discharged them*. There is no *theft* or *embezzlement*, but rather *failure to ensure compliance with proper accounting and auditing procedures in the handling of financial resources*. This is a language the interpreter must master very early on.

All interpreters perform the same tasks, regardless of the language. But asking us to describe how we do what we do is like asking a centipede how it walks. We've been compared to air traffic controllers juggling fifty flights at once, or less flatteringly,

to parrots or ventriloquists' dummies. A colleague once suggested that the interpreter is like a soldier who spends endless hours in training and then has three seconds in the heat of battle to make a series of life-and-death decisions.

Some colleagues play tic-tac-toe with each other out of sheer boredom. Delegates too sometimes get bored. Instead of beginning his speech with the usual 'Thank you, Mr Chairman,' a Russian delegate for whom I was interpreting launched in with 'O my lost youth, my lost youth,' and proceeded to reminisce about the mosaics in the main cathedral in Sofia, including one figure in the cupola that reminded him, as he put it, of 'Christ in a space suit'. Several delegates turned towards the English booth with puzzled looks, undoubtedly wondering if I had gone mad. Going on automatic pilot can be dangerous. You can never be sure that a statement you've heard a thousand times won't turn out differently the next time you hear it. You translate the statement you expected to hear and find yourself congratulating the chairman on his excellent work when in fact the speaker was expressing condolences to the chairman's country on the losses suffered during a major earthquake. In a second you switch gear: 'Therefore, I congratulate the distinguished delegate ... on the extraordinary way his country has coped with the disaster which has struck the nation.' It isn't surprising that interpreters sometimes get ahead of themselves given that the speakers have been hurling the same accusations at each other over a period of years. 'That was going to be the next question I addressed,' a

delegate at the Trusteeship Council once remarked to his opponent, 'but since the interpreter has anticipated it, I'll answer it here and now.'

Being on 'automatic pilot' isn't the same as being 'transparent'. An actor is 'transparent' when he becomes the character he is playing; an interpreter is transparent when he 'locks onto' the speaker and experiences the speaker's entire personality vibrating inside him. At moments such as these it feels as if one is a sheet of cellophane between speaker and audience. And like actors, interpreters frequently have to voice ideas, adopt positions they personally find abhorrent. Suddenly you hear yourself denying that the Holocaust took place or accusing your own country of some crime it didn't commit – there's a kind of perverse pleasure in that.

Listening, processing and speaking – these are the three basic stages of the interpretation process. How, in the four to six seconds that make up the average lag between speaker and interpreter, do you translate a sentence when you don't have a subject? Or a verb? French syntax is fairly close to English, but Russian (like German) can keep either the verb or the subject a dark secret until the very end of a phrase. In most cases, translating word by word will lead to gibberish. Faced with a Russian sentence that begins 'the adopted on 15 April to the great satisfaction of all delegations present in Room 2', I can't wait till I hear the subject of the sentence. The past passive particle is telling me that I'll have to juggle: '*that* which was adopted on 15

April to the great satisfaction of all delegations present in Room 2, *namely*, the resolution ...’ at least makes an English sentence. ‘In our country there is last five years much progress’ is easily transformed into ‘There has been much progress in our country over the last five years,’ but the interpreter has to flip the sentence like a pancake to put the subject at the head of the phrase, while also remembering what he has already said.

Today’s Russian speeches are light years away from those of the Cold War, when the country was permanently on the road to victory, *Put k pobede*, and interpreters were confined to lexically limited and semantically predictable Marxist jargon. Oxymorons – the ‘fight for peace’ and an ‘arsenal’ of ideas – were part of the basic vocabulary and we could all spit out in two seconds the familiar titles, *General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Leonid Ilich Brezhnev*. Nobody noticed when once at top speed I tripped over my tongue, saying ‘Supreme Sodium’. Today Russian speeches run the gamut from bureaucratic jargon to street slang, and are stuffed with English cognates such as *killer* for a *hired assassin* or *piarshchik* for *public relations man*. There are also plenty of new false friends of the translator, such as the ubiquitous *adekvatnyi*, which means *appropriate* or *proper*, not *adequate*, or *utilizirovat*, meaning *to dispose of* rather than *to utilise*, as one interpreter learned to his chagrin during a bout of arms negotiations.

Slips of the tongue – ‘United States’ for ‘United Nations’ – are

common, and embarrassing when broadcast on CNN, but confusing the 'Republic of China' with the 'People's Republic of China' is a serious political error. The foreign accents and odd intonations of English-speaking delegates who are not native speakers are a constant problem. What sounds like 'And now I want to put the water tanks' turned out to be 'I want to put the vote of thanks.' When the interpreter has absolutely no idea of the meaning of a sentence, the solution is, short of shutting off the microphone and bursting into tears, to stay neutral. Most people tend to repeat themselves, and there is a good chance that in the next sentence the speaker will repeat the idea in a more intelligible manner. Specialised knowledge too is a problem. A UN interpreter is lost if he hasn't kept up with the latest developments in international affairs, but he also has to have a broad knowledge of subjects ranging from climate change and oil and gas investments to international trade law, terrorism, Aids, stem cells and human rights, and the new terminology these fields acquire daily. For the interpreter into English the responsibility is even greater, as this is the language most frequently picked up by the media. Idiom is another issue. The English *until hell freezes over* comes out in Russian as *after it rains on Thursday*, and *I had egg on my face* as *I sat down in a puddle*. Confronted with a completely incomprehensible saying, the interpreter does well to say: 'And in my country we have a proverb appropriate to this occasion.'

Anywhere between two and twenty minutes before delivery of a

statement the interpreter may – but also may not – receive the speaker’s text in the original language, sometimes accompanied by an English translation, known as a ‘Van Doren’, after Charles Van Doren, a teacher of English at Columbia who was forced to resign in disgrace when it was revealed that his apparently spontaneous answers to questions on the 1957 TV quiz show *Twenty One* had been rehearsed beforehand. Similarly, an interpreter may look as if he’s translating off the cuff, when he is in fact reading out a translated text.

Are we pleased to be handed the text? Yes and no. There is no guarantee that the speaker won’t have added or deleted material, or reversed the original order of paragraphs. And what if the translation is in execrable English? How does the interpreter feel reading out something that is utterly ungrammatical? I was once given the text, with Van Doren, of a complicated speech on the environment to be delivered by Viktor Chernomyrdin, the former Soviet prime minister. A quick look revealed that the Russian original and the English translation had almost nothing in common. And the speech Chernomyrdin actually delivered at breakneck speed had very little to do with either written version. Most irritating of all is an interfering delegate, one who monitors every word – or every syllable – the interpreter utters, oblivious of the fact that until he’s been given a chunk containing a subject and a verb he is paralysed. On one occasion a colleague was still desperately waiting for the subject of the sentence, only to hear the delegate grumble: ‘There is no interpretation.’ ‘The

interpreter is waiting for the distinguished delegate to continue,’ my colleague said into his microphone. A delegate who is monitoring but who has only a limited knowledge of English can easily fluster the interpreter. One Russian kept using the word *opaseniya*, which translates into English as *apprehensions* or *fears*. Tired of repeating these synonyms, a colleague said: ‘misgivings’. Dead silence, followed by the delegate’s announcement: ‘Is wrong interpretation – we are not giving anything away.’ That kind of thing can drive an interpreter to drink.

Sometimes the chairman will announce that a 15-minute time limit for speakers has just been cut to five minutes, forcing the delegate to read his text twice as fast and leaving the interpreter to gallop breathlessly behind. Listeners forget that the interpreters are not ‘the services’, as they are sometimes termed, or, even worse, ‘the facilities’ (which sounds vaguely like a kind of audio rest room). The ‘facilities’ have physiological limits. Most interpreters work a half-hour shift, but occasionally longer stints are required. At some point even the best interpreter’s brain begins to short-circuit. On one occasion I had to interpret for more than two and a half hours at a round of high-level negotiations. While absolutely convinced I was interpreting into English, I had in fact been repeating in Russian every word the speaker said, blissfully unaware of this because I was mentally interpreting into English – to an audience of one, myself. And then there is the real nightmare: not one from which the

interpreter awakes clutching a pillow, but one in which he has spluttered out an exclamation or highly negative opinion of a speaker or a speech without realising that his microphone is still open. One unfortunate freelancer announced to an entire room that a Spanish speech he had just finished translating was ‘the stupidest and most boring speech I have ever interpreted in my entire life’. I doubt that he was ever hired again.

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