

Interpreting for International Conferences

Danica Seleskovitch

I N T E R P R E T I N G

for

I N T E R N A T I O N A L C O N F E R E N C E S

Problems of Language and Communication

by DANICA SELESKOVITCH

Professor, University of
Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle

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Translated by

Stephanie Dailey
and

E. Norman McMillan

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To
Marie-France Skuncke,
who first taught me how to interpret.

PREFACE

by

Maurice Gravier

Professor, University of Paris - Sorbonne

The conference interpreter plays a very important role in international affairs. Young people who read magazines or keep up with the latest news on television see an interpreter standing between two heads of state. It is easy to see why he is there in the middle. He helps the two VIPs overcome the language barrier and understand each other better; he helps dispel their suspicions and perhaps even makes it possible for them to reach an agreement. Interpreters are thus often involved in discussions of paramount importance to mankind which can lead to peace or war, happiness or despair, poverty or a more equitable distribution of wealth. Many young people secretly identify with this unobtrusive and knowledgeable individual who is instrumental in establishing valuable ties between the world's leaders.

This is why schools of interpretation are swamped with applicants. But can all those who wish to become interpreters qualify? What qualities do interpreters need in order to switch with lightning speed not only from one language to another, but from one conference or seminar to another and even from one mental universe to another? They must be able to move rapidly from one sphere of knowledge or human activity to another: from economics to physics, from politics to textiles or to the leather trade. To judge by the enquiries I have received and those which are addressed to the Secretariat of our School of Interpretation, too few people ask themselves this question, or ask it correctly. The way these enquiries are phrased proves all too clearly that the public at large has a very vague and very inaccurate picture of what interpretation is all about.

Just yesterday I answered a call in my office only to hear an innocent voice enquire, "Do you offer classes in Portuguese at your school?", to which I answered, "I'm sorry, sir, you've made a mistake. A school of interpretation is not a language teaching institution. What we teach is the technique of interpretation, and only those persons who are perfectly fluent in two foreign languages and who can handle their native tongue with eloquence and precision are admitted to the program. These aspiring interpreters must also be versatile and they must be fast thinkers. Furthermore, they must have an inborn curiosity and must have the ability to take an interest in each and every area of human activity. Lastly, interpretation requires that one have nerves of steel, great self-control and acute and sustained powers of concentration."

My unseen caller had nothing further to say, and I hung up the phone. It was then time for me to conduct a foreign visitor on a tour of the school, which also included a description of how interpreters are trained. I showed him the interpretation classrooms with their booths and simultaneous interpretation equipment. However, I also described what is involved in consecutive interpretation -- perhaps the most noble of all types of interpretation -- describing how an interpreter, after having listened to a speech delivered in English, and without the aid of a machine, reconstructs and delivers the speech in French, not only rendering the correct meaning but also maintaining the tone of the original, the sparkle which makes ideas come alive. A good interpreter must, of necessity, be a good public speaker capable of arousing his audience and, if need be, convincing them. In a flash of inspiration the visitor said, "Sir, I have an idea. You should teach shorthand here at your school."

No, my dear man. Shorthand has no place in a school for interpreters. The interpreter does not string words together. He does not have enough time to piece his mosaic together stone by stone. The method he uses is nothing like that of the translator.

Instead, he must quickly take apart the original speech and reassemble it with a certain flair, following the bent of his own character, but particularly the character of the language into which he is interpreting.

How does he achieve this miraculous feat? I shall not attempt to explain it to you. I shall leave that to Danica Seleskovitch, who does a brilliant job of it. She is particularly qualified to do so, since she has had a long and extremely successful career in this profession. She helped found the International Association of Conference Interpreters and served as its Executive Secretary for many years. But she is also a born teacher, and her analyses will be of interest to both psychologists and guidance counselors. However, we also hope that many young students will read this clear and well thought-out book and reflect on it afterwards. It is probably not necessary to train large numbers of interpreters. However, we should seek out those young people who are most likely to succeed at this very difficult, worthy and socially important profession. Danica Seleskovitch's book will undoubtedly dispel the heady illusions of some, but it will also, I am sure, inspire many long-lasting and worthwhile careers.

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C H A P T E R I

INTRODUCTION

"Menschen haben Augen zum
Lesen und nicht zum Sehen."

BRECHT, Galilei.

Today the barriers to communication have been all but eliminated. Airplanes which bring large cities within a few hours of one another have caused us to measure distances, not in miles or kilometers, but in hours of flying time. Radio and television bring information and ideas into the remotest of households. Societies which were unaware of each other's existence for centuries have emerged from their age-old isolation and are today in daily contact with one another. Technical innovations are put into use simultaneously in all parts of the globe, and everywhere life is becoming more and more similar.

Although science and technology have succeeded in eliminating most of the barriers which have separated men from each other, one barrier remains which runs counter to this trend, and which constitutes a hurdle that has proved well nigh insurmountable despite all the forces working to enhance human contact. This is the language barrier, the original curse, the biblical Tower of Babel.

Language, as the expression of civilizations which it helps to fashion, has so far resisted mechanization. In spite of the enormous resources invested since the last war, the translation machine does not yet do a satisfactory job. A report by the National Research Council of the United States, published in November 1966, assessed the previous ten years of research and the \$19 million spent in the area by the U.S. Government alone. The report found that the human translator is 21% faster and clearer and 10% more accurate than the machine; and he is, we hasten

to add, decidedly cheaper. Although the exact percentages may be debatable, the tenor of these statistics is sufficiently striking to be borne in mind.

Translators and interpreters thus have many years of work ahead of them in an area where the machine is still ineffectual. These twin professions have the same goal, act on the same principle and are -- or can be -- based on the same theory. Yet, although the terms "translator" and "interpreter" are often used interchangeably, they do represent two rather different professions, and before launching into the subject of this book, it would probably be useful to define the difference between them. Translation converts a written text into another written text, while interpretation converts an oral message into another oral message. This difference is crucial. In translation, the thought which is studied, analyzed and subsequently rendered in the other language is contained in a permanent setting: the written text. Good or bad, this text is static, immutable in its form and fixed in time. And the translation, equally circumscribed within a written text, is intended, as was the original, for a public the translator does not know. Conference interpreting represents something entirely different. The conference interpreter is there with both speaker and listener, dealing with messages whose fleeting words are important, not because of their form, but almost entirely because of their meaning. He participates in a dialogue, his words are aimed at a listener whom he addresses directly and in whom he seeks to elicit a reaction, and he does this at a speed which is about 30 times greater than that of the translator.

Interpretation, more limited in its goals, more instantaneous than translation, is just as old a profession. Since man has existed, and since he has used language, he has made use of intermediaries in order to communicate from one language to another. We could say that interpretation has always existed. However, in the recent past the scope of human knowledge has broadened to the point where it transcends national boundaries in every field, and it has become

increasingly frustrating to have to communicate through fragmentary linguistic knowledge or improvised spokesmen. This is why, with the increasing number of intellectual exchanges and the establishment of international organizations, interpretation has increasingly and quite rapidly tended to become a profession practiced by specialists.

Today there are two basic types of interpretation: consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation. In consecutive the interpreter gives his interpretation after the speaker has finished his speech, which may last anywhere from a few seconds (a few dozen words) to several minutes (a few hundred or even a few thousand words).

Consecutive, formerly the sole method of interpretation, in which elders of the profession such as André Kaminker and Jean Herbert earned their reputation, is relatively infrequent nowadays. It had its heyday in the League of Nations and, more recently, in the Security Council of the United Nations. Current statistics show that only 10% of interpretation is still done in consecutive. It is used primarily at conferences involving two languages.

Simultaneous interpretation conveys a message into another language at virtually the same moment in time as it is expressed in the first language. The interpreter lags, at most, a few seconds behind the speaker. The speaker speaks continuously into a microphone; the sound of his voice is transmitted to the interpreter who, in turn, speaks in his own language into a microphone that transmits his words to those listening to that language. Simultaneous interpretation began after World War II, first being used at the Nuremberg Trials and then at the United Nations. Broadcasts in English on an American radio network of the discussions in the General Assembly did much to establish the prestige of conference interpreters. Interpreters who rendered speeches of the Soviet delegates into English became stars of the current events scene. Since that time, interpretation has penetrated into all sectors; there are no longer any European or international organizations (EEC, Unesco, FAO, UPU, WHO, OECD, ICAO) which do not have

teams of interpreters sitting in their booths with headsets and microphones. Interpretation is also employed at countless non-governmental conferences and meetings. Because of simultaneous interpretation, the number of languages used in international conferences is growing and it is no longer uncommon for meetings or conferences to use four, or even six working languages.

In 1953 the first conference interpreters founded a professional association.¹ This Geneva-based organization now has a membership of some 1,400 interpreters in 40 countries and six continents.

Many schools of interpretation have also sprung up since the war. Very unequal in quality, they have understood the desire of thousands of young people to be involved in current affairs while making active use of their language skills. The training which they provide is unfortunately often inadequate, given the requirements of the job. This is not surprising because the interpretation process remains somewhat arcane, and is often misunderstood. There is a tendency to see merely its linguistic side and to view it as just a kind of verbal transfer process -- to use a metaphor, the interpreter is seen as a person who can convert a red shape into a blue or green one, with each color representing a different language.

To the conference delegate, interpretation thus appears to be a series of encoding and decoding operations. The message which he emits in his own code to the interpreter is converted into another code to which he does not have the key. When he speaks in German or Russian, his message is "coded" into English or French just as it would be taken down in shorthand or put into Morse code, or simply transcribed on paper. The speaker assumes that the meaning of the message is of no concern to the interpreter, since the

1) AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters), 14 rue de l'Ancien-Port, CH-1201 Genève, Switzerland.

interpreter deals solely with the form of the message. An understanding of the message is therefore felt to be unnecessary for the task at hand, which is seen as a purely mechanical operation: the interpreter need only be fully conversant with the signs belonging to each coding system he handles in order to find the correct counterpart in the other code. The interpreter is seen as a sort of automaton whose codes are his working languages, and the signs comprising these codes are words. The delegate assumes that as soon as the interpreter hears a given word, he automatically -- through extensive practice -- finds its equivalent in the other language.

But is this what really happens? Do the interpreters of the United Nations, Unesco, the EEC, and at countless private meetings and conferences perform the mechanical operation described above? We shall see that, for reasons inherent in the very nature of language, the interpreter could never operate in this manner and that the mental processes involved in interpretation are entirely different.

That is why, before analyzing this process, we would like the reader to have a more realistic idea of what is involved in interpretation by divorcing it from the multilingual, language-juggling aspects of the exercise.

Imagine a situation where two people are speaking to each other in the same language but are separated by a soundproof glass wall. They can see each other but they cannot hear each other (in the same way that speakers of different languages cannot "hear" each other). They can speak to each other through two intermediaries placed on either side of the glass wall. These intermediaries are the only ones capable of hearing both speakers and it is their job to transmit what is said on one side of the wall to the person on the other side. We can imagine what would happen: the speakers on either side of the wall would see each other and talk to each other without addressing themselves directly to either of the intermediaries, whose only role here would be to overcome the acoustical barrier. Each speaker would

stop talking at certain points to allow enough time for the intermediary to repeat what he had just said. The speaker would stop speaking after expressing a complete idea, let us say after every three minutes. One minute of sustained speech corresponds to an average of 150 words, and at the end of three minutes one speaker would have uttered 450 words. It is obvious that the intermediary would be incapable of repeating, word for word, statements of that length that he had heard only once. But will he be able to do what he is supposed to, namely transmit the meaning of what has been said, the semantic content of the speech? Well, each one of us can relate the plot of a book we have just read, even though it may contain some tens of thousands of words. Why, then, shouldn't it be possible to repeat what was stated in a message containing 400 or 500 words? The reader will agree, however, that in order to do this, the intermediary must have understood what he heard (because if not, the rendering of the message will be incoherent or incorrect). This means that one must not only know the language of the speakers but also something about the topic being discussed.

The same principle applies in consecutive interpretation. If the interpreter is fluent in the two languages involved, conversant with the subject matter and, through a very rigorous analysis, grasps the meaning of what is said, he can restate the message. We will see that, once he has understood the meaning behind the speaker's words, he is capable of rendering the original message in its entirety.

The process involved in simultaneous interpretation can be compared to the radio broadcast of a soccer game. The sportscaster who describes for his listeners the action which is unfolding before his very eyes, analyzes very rapidly and accurately the events which the listeners cannot see and transmits them to the listeners in their own language. Unlike the Morse-code operator, he does not encode a set of symbols into another set of symbols, but rather analyzes and explains the meaning of the events taking place; he is in no way thrown off balance by the need

to describe one form of expression (the action of the players on the field) in terms of another (the play-by-play verbalization of that action). The simultaneous interpreter analyzes the statements which he receives through the medium of language in like manner. He does not concentrate solely on the language, any more than he ponders over the expressions he will use to express himself in the other language; rather, he carries out a rapid analysis and spontaneously states what has been said, thereby transmitting the semantic content of the message. And if this semantic content which he conveys is the same as the original, his rendition of the message will -- as we shall see -- necessarily reflect the style of the original.

But is it possible for an interpreter who has had no technical training to convey the semantic content of highly technical messages? Of course not. It is impossible to understand a message without having some knowledge of the subject being discussed. But the problem is not as straightforward as people are wont to believe. The interpreter is not faced with the choice of being either a specialist in the subject matter or simply repeating what he hears, word for word, in another language. Both alternatives are equally impossible. Throughout this book we shall describe the type of knowledge which an interpreter must have and the way in which that knowledge makes comprehension possible.

We shall also see that interpretation invalidates the naive theory about languages which was held to be true for centuries, but which has been disproven by the findings of modern linguistics. This theory held that each word in a language is a symbol and that it has a semantic "twin" in every other language which is identical to it and can serve as a ready translation of it in any context.

This is patently untrue. Unlike numbers, which have identical equivalents in other languages but are articulated differently in each language, words evoke a semantic field which is infinitely more vast than their immediate meaning and do not have

absolute equivalents in other languages. If it were possible, as so many delegates at international conferences still tend to believe, merely to "repeat" the individual words of one language in a foreign language, simultaneous interpretation would be child's play. But words being, as they are, open to an infinity of meanings contingent upon context, situation, audience, etc., a word-for-word translation would only render the primary meaning of the word; the message would not come through clearly and would be little short of incomprehensible. Even if you were to attempt this exercise, you would quickly see the practical impossibility of performing it, given the speed at which it must be carried out. Only words which have similar etymologies and similar phonology can be reproduced at this speed. If you are not convinced of this, try it yourself. Select at random a passage about four or five hundred words in length from an encyclopedia in a foreign language which you know well. Ask a friend, timer in hand, to read this passage out to you in three minutes, i.e. at normal speaking speed. As your friend is speaking, try and "repeat" those same words in English. You will see right away that you cannot spontaneously retrieve words that you know unless some logical thought process brings them to the fore.

We are now beginning to see what interpretation entails. It is not the oral translation of words -- rather, it uncovers a meaning and makes it explicit for others. It is a process of exegesis and explanation. Interpreters are, in this way, no different from musicians or actors who transform the writings of a composer or a poet while nevertheless meticulously preserving the message; the greater their interpreting talent, the more comprehensible the message becomes.

But what about language? Can a definition of conference interpreting exclude language and linguistic problems? Definitely not. If we seem to be playing down the linguistic side of the problem, this is to prevent it from eclipsing more important aspects of interpretation. Language does give rise