

The language of the original speech

A thorough knowledge of the language from which an interpreter translates is for him an absolute requirement. The interpreter who agrees to translate a speech given in a language which he has not mastered is at fault, even if he does so only exceptionally and with the best of charitable intentions. Any departure from this rule is likely to have the most regrettable consequences, either for the assembly which has trusted the interpreter, or for the very reputation and future of the interpreter himself.

Mastery of a language implies more than a full knowledge of its vocabulary and its grammar. One must also be imbued with its spirit, familiar with its traditions, conversant with its sources and its evolution both ancient and modern. One must also be closely acquainted with those literary works which have influenced it, appreciate its sense of humour, know the outstanding names of its history, sense the nuances of its style as well as its euphemisms and clichés which may have lost their original meaning in part or in whole. A fair knowledge of slang is also highly desirable.

The interpreter who is not familiar with Bible, with Shakespeare, and with John Bunyan and Lewis Carroll, may heavily misunderstand the sense and scope of phrases used in English parlance. Phrases like: “A rose by any other name”, “where angels fear to tread”, can have a meaning only for those who know the context. A collection of allusive expressions of this kind would be of considerable use to the aspirant interpreter and to many others as well.

To know what is specific to the language used is not enough. The fullest possible knowledge of the culture of the country from which the speaker hails is also a necessity. At first sight this would seem to imply an encyclopaedic knowledge, but in practice only delegates coming from countries which are culturally of considerable influence indulge in allusions which cannot be understood without a deep knowledge of that culture. Those whose country does not shed its light quite so far realise that they have to explain somewhat, if they want to be understood by their audience.

Nevertheless the interpreter should know that even a wide knowledge of French will not be sufficient to allow him to understand speeches of certain Swiss or Belgian delegates and even if he feels at home in Paris, that will not necessarily make him understand what is meant by a speaker from Morocco.

It is the part of the interpreter's specific duty to understand unintelligible speeches. In a room where many countries are represented, most of the speakers use what is to them a foreign language. Often they speak it badly with strong accent, bad grammar and unhappy choice of words. They shutter and hesitate, so much so that sometimes their colleagues whose own language they speak understand them imperfectly or not at all. It is easy to follow English as spoken by a British diplomat, French by a Parisian professor; but French as spoken by a Portuguese statistician, English by a Japanese admiral, may raise quite another type of difficulty. And in that case the assembly quite naturally turns to the interpreter. His translation may even be listened to by some delegates who normally rely on a different language and have only a very poor knowledge of one which he speaks: he should then slow down and speak out with the greatest possible clarity. If he feels that in spite of his efforts some members who take a great interest in what was said have not understood it properly, he may turn to the Chairman and suggest that for some perfectly imaginary reason, such as noise in the room, the original speech was not properly heard, and he might give a summary of it in the original language. The likelihood is that everybody will pretend to believe him and will be grateful for such timely help.

In the technical training of an interpreter, considerable attention should be paid to such cases. The speeches which the student is given to interpret should in a very large proportion of cases be improvised, ill-pronounced, ill-expressed, given at an irregular speed, and should contain a variety of mistakes. The grotesque aping of a foreign accent and the accumulation of intentional mistakes cannot of course serve that purpose, but in interpretation schools it should be easy to have the speeches made by students with only a very imperfect knowledge of the language required – incidentally, this will also be excellent practice for such students.

A good knowledge of the subject matter of the discussion greatly influences the quality of the interpretation. An expert in a highly technical question, if he has sufficient linguistic capacities, may be a very good extempore interpreter. On the other hand, the best professional interpreter may prove a sad failure if he is totally ignorant of the subject discussed.

Before the beginning of any session it is therefore indispensable to study the subject by a careful perusal not only of the reports and memoranda to be discussed but also of some earlier documents, and even of technical handbooks. With extremely rare exceptions, only what is intelligently understood can be properly interpreted. It is out of the question that a speech on the extraction of hard coal can be properly translated by one who knows nothing about working of a colliery, or a technical discussion on atomic weapons without some idea at least of nuclear physics.

The interpreter will be well advised to consolidate the result of his preparation by drawing up a glossary of the special words and phrases used, both on the subject matter discussed and on its own internal administrative organisation. This glossary should be added to throughout the session, whenever new information is gathered on terminology.

Incidentally, it is always helpful to know at least the main lines of the views which the speaker holds on the subject discussed. This affords the best protection against grave mistranslation, which may result for instance from the fact that a negation has not been heard, or even has been inadvertently omitted by the speaker. Incidentally also, it is always helpful to read the rules of procedure before the session begins, and to know their exact phraseology in the various languages used.

It is not sufficient for the interpreter to have even a very extensive knowledge of the subject with which the conference will deal. He should in addition have an extremely wide general culture, and young interpreters who lack it will be well advised to make all the necessary sacrifices to secure it, even if this means that they have to wait a few years longer before they can earn their living satisfactorily, get married, etc. At any moment, and whatever the subject under discussion, a speaker of a conference may start debating a totally unexpected question. That a committee of statisticians should suddenly deal with medical, agricultural or railway technique, that a congress of lawyers should launch into problems of maritime navigation or the steel industry, that a political assembly should discuss budgeting, migrations or the building of dams is nothing out of the ordinary; but a trade union meeting of the road hauliers may also discuss cold storage, chemists may debate points of Latin grammar, and aviators may show some concern for the technique of budget control.

Like journalists, diplomats, and politicians, the interpreter should be able to speak at any time on any subject, but unlike the others he receives no warning and cannot secure last minute information, and he has no possibility of choosing the appropriate moment when he will speak.

The ideal interpreter would be a living complete encyclopaedia, constantly kept up-to-date with all that is said and done in all kinds of human activity. That of course is not possible in practice, but the conscientious interpreter should untiringly work towards that goal. As we shall see, the very practice of his trade will help him.

However that may be, the interpreter must have a fairly profound knowledge of number of subjects which frequently arise more or less indirectly in all sorts of meeting and which non-specialists are very fond of debating. Among others may be mentioned contemporary history, political and economic geography, civil law, commercial law, constitutional law, economics, budgetary technique, international trade, parliamentary procedure, international organizations. More superficial but still precise information is also required on subjects such as aviation, medicine, agriculture, the technique of various industries, the work of insurance companies, maritime law, physical geography, sociology, etc.