The lady’s voice

Being someone else’s voice, the whole voice and nothing but the voice: that has always been my conception of this profession.

Michel LESSEIGNE.
Published: February 27, 2002 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Some years ago, I accompanied a delegation of Members of the European Parliament to Haiti. Their leader was a German MEP.

The discussions, complicated by the critical state of affairs in that country, took place in a combination of consecutive and chuchotage, in locations ill-suited to holding meetings. Nonetheless, the tiny team of interpreters, both overwhelmed and motivated by what it was seeing and hearing, soldiered on.

One evening, during a press conference, a private radio journalist asked the head of delegation how many nationalities were represented among the MEPs.

I translated her reply - a list - which ended up: “plus myself, and I’m German”.

Hearing me use the feminine form in my French interpretation, the journalist burst into laughter. Turning to me, he asked in a mocking tone whether I was a “German lady”.

My quick-fire retort was “no, I am the lady’s voice”.

The verbatim recording of this brief exchange made quite an impact when it was broadcast on the radio it gave me a certain celebrity status, especially in interviews at subsequent press conferences.

The French ambassador complimented me and gave me a cassette - unfortunately inaudible - as a souvenir.

Being someone else’s voice, the whole voice and nothing but the voice: that has always been my conception of this profession.

I never tire of repeating this modest lesson to the students I come across here, there and everywhere.

Above all else, these future colleagues must learn to convey in their interpretation not their own voice but that of their master: the speaker. With scrupulous respect for the rules of our art, they must learn to translate the message faithfully and render the tone and personality of whoever is speaking. It is not always easy; not everyone is a gifted speaker by nature.

Being someone else’s voice calls for a degree of maturity.

Many interpreters often consider it status-enhancing or even exhilarating to translate famous or eminent speakers.
I do not entirely share this way of thinking: in the course of my career, I have interpreted heads of state or government and Nobel prize winners. Yet they have never really managed to make me grasp the true essence of our profession.

I think I really did grasp it in 1985, at a conference in Hamburg. It was organised by a European network of institutes and bodies headed up by a Danish organisation.

Its extremely ill-chosen slogan was: “normalisation and the mentally handicapped”.

The aim was to highlight the need to integrate disabled people into society and to stop cloistering them in specialist institutions.

The European Commission had lent its support in the form of a team of interpreters.

A major incident occurred on the last day of the conference.

Just as a German professor was about to deliver a lengthy paper in the stilted fashion typical of such occasions, the conference centre’s huge auditorium was slowly invaded by a procession of people who turned out to be the subjects of debate themselves.

Awkwardly (holding some of the banners back to front), the demonstrators make their way to the podium and demand to be heard.

The organisers, visibly disconcerted, hastily improvise a disjointed discussion with the representatives of the troublemakers.

I use this term advisedly, since their words show how the simplest messages can sometimes produce the greatest effects.

The discussion goes reasonably well. Its leitmotif is heartfelt protest: the conference is harping on interminably about the disabled without giving them the slightest opportunity to have their say; they had been brought to Hamburg only to be hidden away in families or host institutions.

Five or six protesters take the floor, and then finally it is the turn of a young Englishwoman.

I cannot forget her: I can still see her, standing quite a long way from the microphone, physically unprepossessing in a creased raincoat. She speaks with difficulty like the others; like the others, she is intimidated but determined.

I don’t know why, but she captivates her audience.

After a long while, she ends her speech which she seemed to be reading from a misshapen scrap of paper that she pulls this way and that.

The improvised “moderator” thanks her and invites her to sit down. To this she immediately replies brusquely: “I haven’t finished”.

After a very long silence, I translate: “I have something more to say”.

She continues after hesitating at length and taking her courage in both hands. She speaks with all the strength of her conviction, clearly and distinctly: “I would like to say… that I want to get married and have children”.

I cannot and would not wish to describe my state of mind after having interpreted those few words. But I realised instantly that that brief moment had conferred on me the distinct honour of being the voice of someone who does not have the right to speak.

That incident has remained to this day the culminating moment of my professional life.
Some time ago, I happened to learn from a television programme that, under certain circumstances and subject to careful supervision by social workers, some countries including France allow mentally handicapped people to have families.

I do not know that Englishwoman’s name or what became of her, but I am proud that her voice was heard.

All conference interpreters have an anecdote, an event, a striking incident or a tale to relate. To mark the Association’s 50th anniversary, the Bureau is assembling a collection aimed at illustrating the enormous variety and wealth of colleagues’ professional experience. Publication will take place initially in Communicate!

Any interpreter wishing to do so may send an article (3 to 4 pages maximum) to Michel Lesseigne (338 Av Slegers, 1200 Bruxelles; mlesseigne@europarl.eu.int). Thank you to those colleagues who have already done so.

Recommended citation format: