Masters of the voice

An interpreter's voice is an instrument for conveying meaning; learn to use it well!

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What comes to mind when you think of an interpreter's "tools"? "Languages", obviously. But hardly anyone spontaneously comes up with "the voice".

One colleague became acutely aware of the prominence of this tool when he was presented to journalists at a press conference as "la voix de Madame" (The lady's voice).

Surely, nobody would expect interpreters to jump between different pitch registers when interpreting male and female speakers. But the fact is that interpreters deliver oral messages in which meaning is conveyed not only through words but also through "paralanguage" - voice quality, intonation, and the speed, volume, rhythm, and pitch of speech, all of which are fundamental components of oral communication.

The voice, therefore, is instrumental in carrying meaning and is a key tool of the interpreter.

Amazingly, though, voice training or voice management plays a marginal role, if any, in the curricula of most interpreters' schools. And while many interpreters experience voice problems at some time in their career, few take a systematic approach to protecting and using effectively this essential job tool.

An article on voice management published in the AIIC Bulletin in 1998 aroused a great deal of interest. Since then, AIIC has started giving the subject more of the attention it deserves.

On 4 and 5 December 1999, the Belgian Region of AIIC held a week-end seminar with voice management specialist Raymond Voyat in Brussels. A global introduction on basic principles of posture, respiration, and expression was followed by workshops (for French and German speakers) focussing on criteria for individual voice evaluation, the correction of flaws in placing, projecting, articulating, and modulating the voice, and the development of a "vocal identity".

Benoît Krémer, convener of AIIC's Central Training Project, organised a similar event on 29 and 30 January 2000 in Geneva. The workshop was delivered by an experienced team of voice trainers who work with actors and TV presenters, François Soulié and Yves Fromonot. The pair also conduct regular voice training sessions for interpreters at the French-German ARTE TV station.

In their Geneva workshop, they explained the basics of speech production, the functioning of microphones and recording equipment, and the impact of electronic reproduction on the voice. Basic voice-related parameters such as breathing, diction, rhythm, articulation, and pronunciation were treated in detail, and the trainers provided practical advice for problem solving. A series of reading and interpreting exercises gave participants a better understanding of what to watch out for and how
to deal with weaknesses discovered in the use of their voice.

A full report on the Geneva workshop (in French) has appeared in the March 2000 issue of the AIIC Bulletin and is reproduced here. A key statement in the conclusions brings us back to the EP interpreter's experience of being "la voix de Madame": "You listen to the speaker, but it's the interpreter you hear."

AIIC will make sure you hear more about voice management - and invites you to speak to us about your ideas and experiences.

Further reading

- Basic Voice Training for Speech, Hahn/Hargis/Lomas/Vandraegen, University of California at Los Angeles, McGraw Hill, 1957
- Guide d'Expression orale, sous la direction de M. Gabay, Larousse, 1991
- Wenn die Stimme nicht stimmt ..., Miethe/Hermann-Röttgen, TRIAS Thieme Hippokrates Enke, Stuttgart, 1993

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