Language in the news

A look at what is being said around the world about language use, translation and interpreting.

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Although interpreters don’t often make news on their own, they are often in the news in one way or another. The Communicate! team has been tracking interpreting and language issues, and now introduces this column to pass on some of what we’ve seen and heard.

The Interpreter to be shot at the UN

It seems that the interpreting booths at the UN have become a fashionable place to be seen with the likes of Nicole Kidman hanging out to discover what flesh-and-bones interpreters do day after day. AP quotes an anonymous UN spokesman as saying that Kidman was there to prep for her role in The Interpreter, a thriller to be directed by Sydney Pollack and co-starring Sean Penn. Kidman plays an African-born UN interpreter who overhears a deadly plot against her country's leader. When she finds herself in danger, Sean Penn becomes her bodyguard.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has given permission for footage to be shot inside UN headquarters, reportedly a first for any Hollywood film. AP reports him as saying that the movie’s message is in line with UN values and will promote peace.

If you want to get a better visual image of what Ms. Kidman may look like at the microphone, you can check out the BBC report of the film.

Hey, nobody’s perfect!

I know I’m not the only one who has been queried about mistakes and other muck-ups in the working lives of interpreters. In fact, that sometimes seems to be the only aspect of what we do that interests others (well, except for the traveling that can always elicit a “That’s interesting,” from one of my fellow Americans). The BBC’s “Breaking the Language Barrier” recently re-visited this question, asking if an interpreter’s slip-up could change the course of human history. Anecdotes abound in this interesting discussion. An audio link is available.

Help yourself and others

The Interpreter Training Resources website aims to help students and trainers share info and ideas. In its own words:

“This site is meant as a compilation of material and links that can be of direct practical help to trainee conference interpreters and their trainers.

Very few students of conference interpreting know what their colleagues in other schools are doing
and the few materials available are publicised by word of mouth only... this is arbitrary, inefficient and a great shame as many people are simply unaware of what is out there.

This site is an attempt to fill a gap and help people to train more effectively. It should complement not duplicate what is already available in other places.”

**Ever play that whispering game?**

This Japan Times item is a bit old, but merits mention. NHK television offers simultaneous interpretation of their nightly news program. Here’s what happened when they covered a George W. Bush and Tony Blair press conference back in April 2003.

“When U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair held a press conference in Belfast on April 8 to discuss, among other things, the fall of Baghdad, NHK covered it live, and the timing happened to coincide with NHK's evening news report.

As they always do when they broadcast an important speech by a foreign head of state, NHK used simultaneous interpreters to convey the remarks in Japanese. However, since the evening news broadcast, which the press conference was pre-empting, is already presented on two audio channels, it meant that viewers had a choice of listening to either Japanese or English. The easiest thing to do would have been to simply patch the satellite audio from the press conference directly into the sub-channel, but instead NHK used the English interpreters who were already on hand for the evening broadcast. In other words, on the English sub-channel you heard simultaneous English interpretation of the Japanese simultaneous interpretation of two men speaking in English. The effect was, to say the least, bizarre, though, granted, sometimes the U.S. president needs all the help he can get.”

**Delicacies of the Engrish Language**

Ever want to nibble some *Dew Dew* and wash it down with a gulp of *Pocari Sweat*? Wondering what chocolate bar offers “The sentimental taste is cozy for the heroines in the town?”

Find it all and more – in real-life pictures - on **engrish.com**.

The site politely informs that “Engrish can be simply defined as the humorous English mistakes that appear in Japanese advertising and product design.” Talking about the language *business*, the site also has a store where you can purchase a “Give me a hand, I’m going to milk the cows” T-shirt. Bookmark it for the next holiday season!

**The unidentified interpreter**

I’ve been doing web searches of photographs of interpreters and almost all I have found leave the interpreter in the most absolute anonymity. I’m not necessarily criticizing the practice, but I do wonder why the press services even bother to include the formulaic “… accompanied by an unidentified interpreter.” I am sure the press could identify someone if they really wanted to, so why don’t they simply drop the “unidentified” bit?

While we are on the subject, a Swedish colleague sent us this article with a great back view of an unidentified AIIC member. While you are on the page, check out the small photo to the right of center under the heading “Portfolio.” Anyone who can identify the brand of headset being worn will win a free life-time subscription to **Communicate**.

**Can you eat from a golden bowl?**

“The 'golden bowl' of translation” from the Shanghai Daily reflects the current high profile of conference interpreting in China. Although some may doubt that the demand for conference
interpreters is as great as reported, there is always room for well-trained, highly competent interpreters - and the launching of serious training programs in China is certainly to be welcomed. The two trainers mentioned in the article – Dai Huiping and Andrew Dawrant – are both AIIC members.

**Here’s some cake for that golden bowl**

What would we do without sports and those who practice them? Or for that matter, what would a professional athlete do with an interpreter he doesn’t want, and how would those around him respond? Check out “Interview with Michael Schumacher Takes the Cake” from Deutsche Welle.

**“That's why the Almighty created interpreters”**

What happens when an editor at the very conservative National Review conducts an imaginary interview with a former head of CIA Counterintelligence - and they get on to the subject of language skills? One thing you get is the phrase heading this section. And opinions like this:

“Oh, language is important, but you know, it's probably better to have a great interpreter than to have a case officer who's had a few years of language training. The interpreter's more likely to catch the nuances. The same goes for ambassadors, by the way. Some of our best ambassadors were utterly hopeless in the language of the country, and some of our worst were guys who figured they spoke the language just fine, and didn't need an interpreter, and wanted privacy with their counterparts. My goodness, I could tell you stories about diplomats.”

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