Letter from the Editor: The interpreter as generalist

Does an interpreter know a little about a lot, but a lot about nothing? Is he a jack-of-all-trades and master of none?

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Years ago I attended a gathering of alumni of my undergraduate university, one of those American institutions of higher learning that still wax eloquent about the value of a broad, well-balanced education. The Director of Admissions happened to introduce himself, asking what I did. “Conference interpreter,” I replied, half expecting the look of consternation those two words often provoke among even well educated Americans. But with a quick smile, probably born of a bit of spontaneity and the best training that corporate academia can offer, he replied, “What an excellent result of a liberal arts education!”

Well, there I am in a nutshell, the product of a liberal arts education; not simply because I received one, but because I believed in the value of one. “Learning for the sake of learning” was the stock-phrase of the time, and “learning how to learn” certainly came into style before I got my BA (I was an early practitioner of the gap year), but today I think of it simply as having gotten my bearings.

Conference interpreting was a good fit for me, and I sometimes facetiously claim that I chose it because it was the last profession open to a generalist. In fact, being a generalist is a good start, but not enough in itself. An accomplished interpreter also becomes a specialist in…. well, interpreting.

I approached this same topic from the angle of craft in a March 2004 article. In essence, as an apprentice advances toward mastery, his skills attain an increasing degree of automaticity. And while a novice tends to see things through a micro-lens, concentrating often on discrete elements, the expert is characterized by a macro-approach; he sees a larger picture. One result is that all that general knowledge is more readily available and can be put to better use than ever before.

The Encyclopedia Britannica entry on evolution throws a curious light on this. “Species cope with environmental heterogeneity in diverse ways. One strategy is the selection of a generalist genotype that is well adapted to all of the subenvironments encountered by the species.” Far be it from me to claim that we form a separate species, but since I would maintain that interpreters are by force generalists on the knowledge/information front, perhaps we have (or develop) a “trait” that helps us adapt to the many subenvironments in which specialised skills must summoned.

While searching for information on generalists, I came across an article with the evocative title of General Knowledge in the Post-Carbon Age. “General knowledge,” the author suggests, “is a set of filters, scripts, evaluations, and decision tools.” Good start! Later on he adds: “The way it actually
operates is to act as the underlying mental equipment that we have for doing our day-to-day tasks.”

He obviously isn’t thinking of our job, but I believe his words evoke an excellent image of interpreting. General knowledge, which embraces the ability to think analytically in context, is a major support system to our more specialised skills. We use the two jointly to communicate ideas.

In today’s highly technologized society, specialisation is revered. Generalists may still be admired, but only when eulogized as strategists, as the synesthists who can create synergies for the greater profit of all. In a rapidly changing world, those who know how to learn and adapt have an advantage. A combination of generalist and specialist might indeed be what is called for.

All of which takes me back to our lead-in question and the best answer I can offer for now: Interpreter -- a jack-of-all-trades and master of one.

This issue

Panayotis Mouzourakis’ How do we interpret? generated quite a bit of discussion in the pages of our previous issue - and it’s about to continue. We lead off this issue with How Should We Interpret? A counterpoint to Panayotis Mouzourakis' article by Sergio Viaggio, who says: “I was most pleasantly surprised by Panayotis' piece; this kind of reflection should be a constant presence in any professional forum. That having been said, I cannot but take issue with some of his remarks.”

Over the last month the world had been bombarded with pictures of Nicole Kidman talking into a microphone behind a pane of very clean glass. Will the result be that the world will learn what an interpreter actually is? From Barcelona, Danielle Grée takes another slant on the Sydney Pollack thriller.

A freelancer can continue to work as long as he or she sees fit. So when, if ever, should one stop stepping into the booth? Wadi Keiser has been thinking about this and related questions. In When to quit, how to quit: should AIIC do something about it? he shares his ruminations with us.

The World Social Forum brought together more than 150,000 people in Porto Alegre (Brazil) earlier this year. Peter Naumann, an interpreter with long experience working with the WSF, examines developments in interpretation services in Babels and Nomad – observations on the barbarising of communication at the 2005 World Social Forum.

Our next author has long been a regular contributor to Communicate! and we’ve finally decided to give him his own column heading: Off mic with Phil Smith. In this installment he takes a sideways glance at the ever precarious balance between life and work.

We all know about the major news organisations and wire services, but what other sites are interpreters consulting to keep their general knowledge up to date or to simply satisfy their curiosity? I recently asked a number of colleagues about alternative sources of information they use on the internet. Language in the News reports the results - and leaves the comment function open for you to add more.

For anyone wondering how interpreters’ general and specialised knowledge fit together in the practice of our profession, we recommend these articles:

- Interpreters
- La carrière d’interprète vous tente-t-elle?
- Precarious, ma non troppo
- Advice to Students Wishing to Become Conference Interpreters.
Good reading to all and see you again in September.

Recommended citation format: