Interpreter voices: Loreto Bravo

A Madrid-born, Montreal-raised interpreter and translator, Loreto was Head of Language Services at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons from 1997 to 2006 after heading the Spanish

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I met Loreto at the 2006 AIIC General Assembly and was impressed with her views on organising teams. It's a pleasure to be interviewing her.

MF: How did you become an interpreter? Have you had other professional experiences?

LB: I studied literature in Montreal, where I grew up. At the time it was quite usual for those who wanted to become translators to get a language or literature degree.

My father was an international civil servant at ICAO, and that international organisation kindly allowed me to do a bit of dummy-booth practice in simultaneous interpretation, but after college I settled in Spain and found a job as company translator with a multinational firm in the oil sector.

Since at the time there was no university qualification for interpreters and translators in Spain, and in order to have some kind of an official acknowledgement of my aptitude, I sat the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Sworn Interpreter examination – paradoxically, an exclusively written affair, at the time.

After an eleven-year stint as company translator with Chevron, I resigned to take up freelance work. Not long after, I began to receive requests for my services as sworn interpreter before the Courts. At the time, APETI, the Spanish umbrella association of translators and interpreters, organised an excellent consecutive interpretation course, which I followed to ensure that the professional services I was providing were adequate. Shortly after that I also began to work in the booth.

MF: You worked as a freelance in Madrid before joining an international organisation as a staff member. What were the main differences in your work? Were your outlook and opinion modified in any way?

LB: The major difference between the work of a freelance translator and interpreter and that of an international civil servant is that the freelance usually works with a variety of subjects, while the staff member’s work is usually circumscribed to a relatively limited number of areas.

I remember when I told my father that I was taking up a job with the OPCW, he told me I’d probably end up as sick and tired of chemical weapons as I had of petroleum issues.

Having said that, no matter how specialised the work of an international organisation or company might be, staff translators and interpreters always encounter a variety of issues in their work: for
example, meetings at the OPCW not only cover multinational disarmament negotiations but also deal with medical, scientific, legal, financial, military and security issues, as well as technical inspections and so on.

As far as the work process itself is concerned, the background knowledge acquired as a staff member, and also the availability of support services organised by the language section – terminology, documentation, references, briefing sessions before meetings with interpretation, access to specialists and delegations for the purpose of clarifying terms and concepts – provides greater consistency and continuity, which greatly facilitate the staff interpreter's task compared to that of the freelancer, who usually has to arrange his or her own support services.

On the other hand, the sustained demands on the staff interpreter’s performance, including precision and quality, are very high, and add to that certain political considerations which apply in the case of international organisations, where the interpreters can be “held hostage” by a meeting, since sometimes a perfectly accurate interpretation is used as an excuse to prolong negotiations or to justify misunderstandings. This goes with the job, but it’s never pleasant for the interpreter, who is sure of the quality of his or her performance. In my experience, at least, it only happens in the context of international organisations.

MF: Did you organise teams of interpreters before you joined the OPCW? What differences do you see between freelance consultant interpreters and staff chief interpreters?

LB: I had never organised teams of interpreters before I joined the OPCW, and I seldom do so now. I’m a perfectionist, and I don’t like worrying about having to work in substandard conditions.

When the language services at the OPCW were being consolidated in 1997 when the organisation proper was set up, I was fortunate to have excellent colleagues and a very intelligent supervisor who, though not a language professional, understood the difficulties of our professional activities, our technical requirements and our need for support services as well as the political importance of our work, and who valued and supported us fully.

At the OPCW we were successful in making the language service – rather than the delegations – “own” all languages, with the head of each section recognised as the maximum authority in the corresponding language. This means that the service is duty-bound to provide watertight performance, but it also deserves and earns the respect and support of all users, within both the Secretariat and the policy-making organs.

Being both a manager and a practising professional allowed me to set up optimal technical and administrative conditions for the work of the language section from the interpreters’ viewpoint, since I was able to give first-hand explanations for the reasons behind my demands both to the administration and to the delegations.

I will insist on this point: the quality of the services provided by my colleagues and their professional demeanour made it possible to obtain consistent recognition for our profession and our job-related requirements.

As I already said, I hardly ever organise teams now. Ensuring top-quality interpretation and getting across to users how teams of interpreters work and why certain conditions must be provided is difficult in any circumstance, and doing it for each individual customer must be an exhausting task. I have the utmost admiration for individuals who organise interpretation teams and for freelance consultant interpreters.

MF: You know AIIC, but you are also familiar with other Spanish organisations with different criteria. What led you to join AIIC?
LB: I’ve always been very involved with associations, with group projects and networking. During the first years of my life as a professional, and especially during my first stint as a freelance, I put in quite a few hours at the Spanish professional association of translators and interpreters to improve our professional work in every way and gain recognition for our professions.

I have to say that all the time and effort I gave to the association was richly rewarded from a personal viewpoint. You learn a lot by volunteering, not only about sides of the profession you are not directly involved in, but also about human relations, good professional practices, the public’s expectations and misgivings, relations with public administrations…

It’s also lovely to work with colleagues for the common good, and to meet individuals who are sometimes very different from you and who pursue the same objectives from perspectives you don’t always share. I’ve made many very good friends while working for our profession.

When I joined an international organisation, an environment where professional practices are rather well established and specific problems must be solved internally, I stopped my involvement with association-related activities for a while. But I soon had occasion to start cooperating with AIIC in the Netherlands, specifically on lifelong training, which as far as I’m concerned is an essential activity.

Then I was invited to teach in the annual course for professional interpreters that is organised in Cambridge, and I realised that I was encouraging participants to join AIIC – an association to which I alone among all the teaching staff didn’t belong – because I fully shared its professional philosophy. So when my dear friend Javier Ferreira, at the time AIIC Council member for the Netherlands, asked me why I hadn’t yet joined AIIC, I was simply shamed into applying…

MF: What would you say now to an aspiring interpreter who asked for your advice?

LB: That would greatly depend on the aspiring interpreter and on the advice sought. To someone without an aptitude for interpretation or without the sound linguistic and cultural background it requires, I’d recommend taking up another profession. To someone with the necessary aptitudes I’d give advice based on his or her circumstances.

Now there are several good interpretation schools, and it would seem logical to recommend that aspiring interpreters train there. But there are also other ways of joining the profession for individuals whose circumstances preclude conventional training. For example, in view of the difficulties encountered when it came to covering some vacancies at the OPCW, whose language officers are called upon to translate as well as to interpret, in some cases we chose to recruit experienced translators who passed an aptitude test for interpretation. I must say that, during the time I was in charge of the language service there, eight staff members recruited in this way managed to become real interpreters, by dint of enormous personal effort, the support of their colleagues, supervised practice – dummy booth first, and then real-life meetings of a relatively uncomplicated nature – and in several cases subsequent participation in the Cambridge course for professional interpreters.

As far as young professionals are concerned, I think that seasoned interpreters should help them insofar as our circumstances allow, by recruiting them when possible, providing positive professional advice when it might benefit them as well as sound support in the booth, and always by setting a good professional example, not only to help them personally but also to ensure the future of our profession.

MF: What other profession would you have liked to pursue?

LB: I’d also have liked to be a writer or a singer. These two professions are quite close to ours; a command of language is as necessary to be able to write as it is to be able to interpret, and a
well-trained voice is essential both for a singer and for an interpreter. I’ve had voice training and I enjoy singing in my free time.

MF: Finally, what is the strangest or the most interesting thing that ever happened to you as an interpreter? (Provided you can share it, of course.)

LB: Much as any interpreter with many years of professional activity, I could share many strange and interesting anecdotes, and also many amusing stories. I can think of one which perhaps is a bit of all three. When the first conference was being organised at the time of the creation of the OPCW in 1997, my then supervisor, a diplomat, told me with considerable concern that delegations thought that the cost of interpretation (several weeks of work with two 14-interpreter teams) was too high, and asked whether I thought it feasible to go with a delegate’s suggestion of recruiting students of interpretation, in order to keep costs down. I replied that I thought this was a brilliant idea, provided that the delegations of the States Parties were also made up of students from the corresponding diplomatic schools. It goes without saying that, as soon as the message got through to the delegations, the whole idea was dropped.

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English version by Loreto Bravo

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