Interpreters: Breaking in and staying there

The challenges facing international conference interpreters are daunting - and multiplying.

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Mariamne Makri is on a trainee interpreter scheme at the European Parliament and it is all rather daunting: "I've still not quite got the technique" she laments, "I tend to parrot, to interpret word for word, I haven't learnt yet how to relax." Despite this, she knows it's her vocation: "The atmosphere here is so exciting" she enthuses, "as an interpreter here you feel you are helping to facilitate important events."

The interpreting life in Brussels

She is not alone in wanting the job. There are probably more interpreters per head in Brussels than any other city in the world. Even New York can't compete. The Big Apple's UN permanent staff of 119 interpreters for example, seems paltry in comparison to the 951 permanent interpreters at the Commission, Parliament and other EU institutions. And that's not counting the Brussels pool of about 1500 freelance interpreters available on tap. With that high number and demand from other places such as NATO and other internationals and multinationals, you would think that interpreter's life in Brussels should be an easy ride. But it is not. And it is not getting easier.

Brian Huebner has worked as an interpreter for over 18 years. Currently working with seven languages he is now learning an eighth. Despite having studied Spanish and Russian at school, he says he is only at a "professional standard" with his mother tongue English and French, German, Dutch, Italian, Danish and Swedish. He's learning Polish, he says, because he loves the intellectual challenge. Though his career has been very successful, he believes the interpreting world is harder now then when he first began.

Corinne Imhauser knows the strains. She gave up her career as a full-time interpreter fifteen years ago to become a Lecturer in Interpreting at the Institut supérieur de Traducteurs et Interprètes (ISTI) because "I am a perfectionist and it would get me down when you are judged as doing a bad job, when you are not given the conditions to do so. Interpreters can seem aggressive, bitter, but in order to survive you have to be able to say I am not going to have sleepless night, when the conditions made it impossible."

Breaking in

The qualifications are tough. You not only need fluency in several languages, but a stint at interpreter school too. For interpreting is a skill, most admit, that needs to be taught; it is rarely innate. At ISTI in Brussels (one of three interpreting schools in Belgium), for example, there is a four-year undergraduate and a one-year postgraduate course. You need a minimum of fluency in three languages even to get in. What's taught instead, are the politics, news, culture and linguistics of
the languages as well as techniques such as working with a microphone, note taking, preparation of technical vocabulary and researching background details of an assignment beforehand. It's not an easy task. In 1999 only a dozen out of the original 400 who started the undergraduate course, passed the interpreting exams.

So what makes it so tough? Well it is not just techniques — it's your personality too. Imhauser admits that some candidates fail the selection process if they don't have the personality "to listen" and instead want to convey their own interpretation of events. Selim Earls, a freelancer who works with English, Greek, Spanish, German and French remembers the advice he was given at an interpreters school in Greece where he was told, to forget the image of an interpreter as playing centre stage and instead "To prepare to play the role of a potted plant in the corner." Silke Gebhard, Vice-President of the union, AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprétes de Conférence), who also interprets with German, Dutch, English, French and Spanish, sees the role like a piano accompanist to a musician, but says "An interpreter must never forget you are in the back row, while the star, the performer is in the front."

It's also not just a matter of translating words. Patrick Twiddle, of the European Parliament Interpretation Directorate, says interpreting is also understanding non-verbal communication, "With things not said," he explains, "like humour, irony and reading between the lines, the message can often be as much in the tone of the voice as in the words." Gebhard agrees that the job is not to be "a walking dictionary" but to also interpret the body language, expressions and emotions that can speak volumes too. But, she says, "As interpreters we do fear jokes." For jokes, she explains, can depend on a play of words that has no immediate equivalent in another tongue and so "It is often difficult to find a joke on the spot." Instead, she says, you make a humorous comment in the hope whoever is listening to you will laugh and so share the joke with everyone else.

Unlike translators who have the luxury of time to stop and think (and peruse their dictionaries), interpreters have to perform under the pressure of the here and now. Indeed watching a session at European Parliament where the parliamentary discussions are being interpreted simultaneously into all eleven official European tongues, you can only wonder at the verbal gymnastics going on in the head of the interpreters in their booths. It's a split-second decision-making event — with each interpreter listening, processing, translating and speaking all at the same time.

Verbal gymnastics under the microscope

It's a process of which scientists are at pains to explain. Imhauser says: "Despite years of psycho-socio-linguistic research, no-one can figure out how the brain can perform simultaneous interpreting without going berserk." Huebner likens it to "surfing — after the adrenalin of riding a wave, you don't know when the next wave is going to hit you. You are not controlling the pace or the subject."

It's also a matter of concentration. It's a scientific fact that the brain can only hold that level of focus for about 30 minutes before running out of steam, so it is really important that there are at least two interpreters per booth to share the load. For as Barbara Moser Mercer, author of several interpreting manuals, points out, during a 30-minute session, an interpreter "processes and delivers an average of 3000 to 3900 words (equivalent to 12-15 type written double-spaced pages). With fast speakers...the interpreter's output can increase to 4050-5400 words or 16-21 pages."

Surprisingly, it is not the "unknown" or "unusual" word that can bring on interpreter stress but the difficulties of interpreting from fast speech. As Imhauser explains, different languages have a different amount of words and hence need more or less time to translate: "There are 15-20% more words in Latin languages to explain the same things as spoken English, so the English speaker should speak slower." Then there are the internal dynamics of the different languages as well.
Gebhard, a native German speaker explains that the structure of German with the verb at the end of a sentence can cause headaches for other languages, and quotes a standard interpreter joke where an interpreter listening to German has to tell his English audience, "I am awfully sorry I can't start interpreting yet, I am still waiting for the verb."

The modern world has brought with it new problems too. In standard conference surroundings, interpreters can already face the daily technical irritations that make their work hard, like poor sound and badly working microphones. But when you add to that the advent of video-conferencing, the problems compound. For not only is video-conferencing more vulnerable to technical problems, but as Gebhard explains, it gives the interpreter a more limited visual access to the world they are going to interpret—you can't read facial expressions, for example, with poorly presented screens.

**Keeping you balance**

The key to keeping your sanity, all interpreters agree, is learning how to unwind. And for that, everyone has a different technique. Earls method is: "When I leave the meeting, I try to close the door on the meeting and the world." Huebner works out with weights and has always developed a strong social life, because "Your job is spent entirely speaking in the third person, processing other people's ideas. You are not spending enough time on yourself. Sometimes you have to sit yourself down and say to yourself, "What do I think of this issue?" Imhauser knows of interpreters that have high adrenalin hobbies to let off steam like champion sailing, rally driving, or even crochet "to stop the mind whirring." She is worried however, by the high rate of nervous breakdowns and alcoholism, she believes is prevalent in the business.

An added dimension for freelancers today is not only how many but what languages they can speak. With a Belgian freelance market saturated with interpreters who can work with the common European tongues, like say English, French and Spanish, the hunt is on for those who can also speak the less widely spoken European ones like Greek or Portuguese. But as Huebner explains some mother tongues are more marketable than others. If English or German is your native language he believes, it's easier to get continual day-to-day interpreting work than day-to-day work with a language less used in Belgium.

And finally in Brussels, there is the expected new linguistic demands on the horizon, namely a need for interpreters for non-EU European languages, given the expected absorption of new candidate countries into the EU. In fact, to prepare for this, the Parliament has asked its own Interpreting Service to be ready for Bulgarian, Czech, Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak and Slovenian, and maybe even Maltese and Turkish by 2004. It is "A Herculean task," says Twidle, "to double the number of existing languages almost overnight." He then explains that a difficulty is looking for "combinations," i.e. people who can translate one language into their mother tongue, say Finnish into Bulgarian. "With 23 languages, we are confronted with 506 combinations to be covered, compared to only 12 combinations with the original 4 official languages of the European Community," he explains but then goes onto admit that "We do not expect interpreters to learn an unlimited number of languages." Instead he says he will be looking for "People who interpret in two directions, both into and out of their mother tongue."

And so **what does this all mean to a novice** like Makri entering the business in Brussels today? Despite all the pressures, all the interpreters insist it's a job they adore. And if your language skills are limited like mine, all you can do is look admiringly at those who carry, interpret and translate Brussels's linguistic load.

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