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INTERPRETATION: MAGIC, MYTH, OR SCIENCE?

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. You see on your schedules that Matt Ellsworth will now address the subject, "Interpretation: Magic, Myth, or Science?" That is only partially correct; I am Matt Ellsworth. But the perhaps unfounded paranoia of being sandwiched between translators and linguists leads me to suggest a change in stance and title—from the passive question to this direct statement, "Interpretation: The State of the Art." Allow me the satisfaction of supposing that I am telling you something new, and together we will examine the state of Interpretation as a profession and practice. We will also see its various modes and training techniques.

The famous composer, Schumann, left a bit of advice to his students to teach them humility. He wrote, "Beyond the mountains there live people, too." How appropriate it is, considering these words, that man's most humbling experiences, at any point in time or at any level of abstraction, are when he leaves the valleys, real or imaginary, into which he has fled for shelter, and finds himself with strangers, foreigners, or even worse! It is in such encounters that order is maintained and communication established thanks to the work of the interpreter. The voice of this specialist adds confidence to travellers and is accepted as truth by diplomats.

The interpreter is seldom seen, preferring to be thought of, perhaps, as omnipresent, as a voice between one's ears. It adds to his mystique. Like the good side of the Force, Obe Wan Kenobe, he is an invisible aid.

Parenthetically, I mention to the ladies present that when I use pronouns "he", "his", "him", etc., you may aptly substitute feminine equivalents, since the majority of professional interpreters are women. I, however, will continue with the pronouns to which I am accustomed, no doubt to the delight of the sociolinguists in the room.

So, how did the interpreter end up tucked away in a glass cage, wired for sound, after beginning in ancient times as a right-hand man of rulers and confidant of kings? The history, greatly simplified, goes like this: In the beginning, there was Summary Interpretation (also called Interpretation in the Summary Mode). Or, if you will—in the beginning were the words, and the words were uttered, and not everyone understood them, and so there was Summary Interpretation. This method allowed men to speak at will, halting only infrequently to permit the interpreter to give the general idea of what had been said. But this mode was faulty, relying too heavily on the human memory. We might correctly imagine that many persons—especially interpreters—lost their lives as a result of misunderstandings.

A modification was made; Interpreters began to take notes, and Consecutive Interpretation was born. After finding that speakers would not slow down enough to allow precise transcription, a form of pictographic shorthand was devised by each interpreter to help spark his memory when his turn at the podium arrived.

With the help of Stephen Garrard, a first-year student of Translation and Interpretation in Spanish at Brigham Young University, I will demonstrate the Consecutive Mode. Before doing so, I will mention that, professionally I am rusty, and that I am not familiar with what Steve is about to read, although I do know the topic. My nearly inevitable foibles will serve to illustrate the limitations of this mode. Steve— (At this point, Steve read two paragraphs in Spanish, and Mr. Ellsworth took the following notes on an overhead transparency for the audience to see. He then read his notes in English, giving an interpretation of what was read.)

<p>Match. idus ewsh</p> <p>✓ Cid → Neruda</p> <p>Q Paz</p> <p>Cast → inf. soc</p> <p>Gov</p> <p>hist</p> <p>Soc</p> <p>Cult</p> <p>? many exp.</p> <p>is date win</p>	<p>10/</p> <p>language changes</p> <p>wh } in [Sp]</p> <p>lanta ○ many fac</p> <p>Exp</p> <p>Colo</p> <p>Ch</p> <p>Mex</p> <p>ste cuz of</p> <p>high sis</p> <p>Common</p>
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Here is what they mean: Since language is a natural occurrence, it has undergone an evolution. Since the time of the Poema del Cid until the poets, Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz, the Spanish language has developed through an infinity of cycles: geographical, historical, societal, and cultural. What worries many experts is the way that Spanish has been broken into numerous dialect groups, with the resulting changes in vocabulary, syntax, and mode of expression. This dialect movement, now underway in most Spanish-speaking countries, has reached a point where many fear that a Spaniard, a Colombian, a Chilean, and a Mexican will soon be unable to communicate because of the divergence of their linguistic systems.

This form still accounts for nearly 10% of all interpretation performed at international conferences, and allows personal contact between speaker and audience in bilingual situations. The speaker can express his entire message before yielding the microphone, which is helpful to the

interpreter, who is allowed to understand a complete thought or thesis, rather than being asked to transfer mere bits and pieces of thought. Speeches interpreted in this way are normally about five minutes in length, but may be much longer.

The constraints are obvious: the interpreter must completely understand the speaker, and the notes and symbols must be readily understood mnemonic devices or there will be losses in the transfer.

With the development of electronic aids—especially the microphone, the television, and the headphones—interpreters found new challenges.

"What if ... ?," they thought. "What if all the waiting could be eliminated? What if we, through the miracle of electricity, could snatch a speaker's words as they leave his lips and transform them immediately into another language? No, that won't do! Our first duty is to transmit messages, and that would leave no time for understanding."

"Well then, what if we were to wait just a moment, and then begin? It would be marvelous! It would be ... why ... SIMULTANEOUS!" And so it was. Beginning with the Nuremberg War Trials, interpreters began to put aside their note pads, rely on preparation more than memory, and go directly to the heart of the matter—Interpretation at its best—in Simultaneous Mode. From there it spread to the U.N. and through that organization's many branches into all areas of international dealings.

"But, how is it done?," cried the critics and students.

"Word by word," supposed the delegates.

"They paraphrase," answered the translators.

These guesses were incorrect. The answer was and is this simple. When one speaks, he does not often pause to regroup his thoughts, but charges forward, confirming his stance as he goes, adapting tone and level to the stimulus of his audience, restricted in velocity only by vocabulary and his own sluggish articulatory organs.

In like manner, the interpreter who can train his mind to gather data from the speaker, in order to form the next sentence of his rendition, can speak as rapidly and as clearly as the originator, only in another language, following one thought behind. This bears repeating. Simultaneous Interpretation is performed by the interpreter who hears and understands the speaker, as a secondary task, and expresses the thoughts of the speaker, which have become his own, in another language. It is as easy as speaking, once the mental ability to accept as your own thoughts the words of another is developed.

This is the state of the art of interpretation. An interpreter prepares himself as would a ballerina, pianist, or professional athlete—through hours and hours of practice. He hones his mental abilities and accumulates useful vocabulary through practice and by using several accepted techniques. The first is called shadowing. You might call it parroting.

I am now giving you a demonstration of shadowing.* You see, this presentation is not memorized, nor am I using notes. It is on tape, and I am simply repeating what I hear. This teaches the student of interpretation that hearing and understanding are natural and can be accomplished while performing other tasks, manual or mental, such as numbering backward from 100 on paper, or copying written texts.

It is also the first step in the improvement of decalage, which is the gap left by the interpreter between the original speech and his rendition. If the speaker is choppy, and leaves gaps, the interpreter has an easy time. But if the speaker is incessantly changing speeds and tones, it becomes more difficult to fall behind. An accepted decalage is slightly over one phrase, allowing the absorption of a complete segment of thought before interpretation is carried out.

These two practices, decalage and shadowing, are later used by the student in bilingual practice, until a plateau is reached where normal, clear speech is interpreted into the student's native language without difficulty. Thereafter, continued practice with varying degrees of difficulty in accent, speed, vocabulary and level of speech completes the student's training. .-

This is the work and study of the modern interpreter. We thank you for your attention.

*To this point, Mr. Ellsworth was listening through an earphone to a cassette recorder before him on the podium. Here he removed the earphone plug from the recorder, allowing the audience to hear both him and the recording. Such parts will hereafter be underlined.