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Utah's 2002 Olympics: The Role of Foreign Languages

Marian Babirecki-Labrum

INTRODUCTION

Salt Lake City will host the Winter Olympics in 2002. When Salt Lake City was chosen, it was quickly noted that the state of Utah has one of the largest percentages of foreign language speakers per capita. This particular characteristic has been noted as a plus for the Olympics. The truth is that this advantage may not necessarily be sufficient to meet some of the foreign language needs that the Olympics require. This is because people often mistake the ability to speak a foreign language with the skills that are needed to provide language translation and interpretation services during the Olympics.

This paper will first define "translator" and "interpreter." Second, it will identify the official role of foreign languages at the Olympics according to the charter of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and will look at how the Salt Lake Organizing Committee (SLOC) is planning to comply with the expectations of the IOC. Third, it will address the perception that the ability to speak a foreign language qualifies a person to be a translator or an interpreter for the Olympic Games. Fourth, it will address some of the questions troubling BYU students concerning the Olympics and provide possible answers.

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION — A PROFESSION

Translation and interpretation are professional services provided by highly trained people. A translator is a person who facilitates communication between at least two different languages by writing. In other words, a translator writes. An interpreter is a person who facilitates communication between at least two different languages via the spoken word. An interpreter, therefore, speaks. A translator works with written text and produces a written text. An interpreter generally works with a verbal text, and the end product of an interpreter is an oral rendition of the source message.

During the Olympics, a translator needs to produce written documents in a language different than that of the original text. These documents may deal with IOC matters, host city organizing committee matters, and any official communiqués issued by the IOC or the host city organizing committee. These documents are often used by the media and kept for the record. An interpreter, on the other hand, must be able to work in several modes: as a simultaneous interpreter, as a consecutive interpreter, and sometimes as an official escort interpreter.

A simultaneous interpreter works in a booth, uses electronic equipment, and must be able to convert a message heard over earphones in one language into another language almost at the same speed as the speaker speaks. In simultaneous interpretation, there

is a lag of a few seconds between the speaker and the interpreter, but at no time does the interpreter completely stop speaking. Simultaneous interpretation allows for the same speech to be interpreted into several languages by several interpreters working at the same time. In simultaneous interpretation, interpreters work in teams (two to a booth) and are isolated in sound-proof booths dedicated to each language.

A consecutive interpreter is trained to listen to the entire speech, take notes of key elements of the speech using a highly specialized annotation system, and then reconstruct the speech in another language after the speaker has completed his or her rendition. A consecutive interpreter becomes the "speaker" after the speech has been delivered by the original speaker. This allows interpretation into only one language, because the interpreter usually speaks from the same podium used by the speaker.

When a professional consecutive interpreter is not available, or when the organizers of the meeting deem it preferable, consecutive interpretation takes the form of what I term "ping-pong interpreting." In this instance, both the speaker and the interpreter usually stand at the podium. The trick is to have the speaker "chunk" his or her speech so that the interpreter may repeat what has been said but in the target language. This form of modified consecutive interpretation requires that the speaker only speak a short paragraph ("chunk" in the technical lingo) at a time; the interpreter then has total recall of the "chunk" and can deliver its interpretation. Hence, my nickname, "ping-pong interpreting." This mode of consecutive interpretation allows for work in only one new target language.

Translators and interpreters are sometimes required to give an "oral translation" of a written document. This mode of oral translation is performed simultaneously. The translator or interpreter

speaks at the same time as he or she reads the document. The document is written in one language, and the translator/interpreter vocally reports it in another language. This mode is called "sight translation," and there are no pauses between reading the document and providing an oral rendition of the document. Sight translation is frequently used in the courts when a foreign language document needs to be entered into the record as evidence/information.

Another mode of interpretation is "escort interpreting." In this mode, the interpreter is required to switch back and forth between languages. Escort interpreting requires fluidity in both languages and an intimate knowledge of the social graces of both countries. An escort interpreter usually works with two people who speak different languages and need to communicate with each other during all types of activities, from peace negotiations to dinner parties and theatrical functions. The escort interpreter becomes the voice of each client in the language that he or she does not speak. Bilingual proficiency and social graces are a must, because the escort interpreter usually sits between both clients and is required to blend with the occasion.

While a translator is usually required to work in a secluded environment and can avail himself or herself of all types of reference materials, an interpreter must resolve any language problem on the spot and without the recourse of using reference materials. Thus, translators very seldom work as interpreters, and interpreters seldom work as translators. These two professions are often the subject of attention because they are often misrepresented or misunderstood. The following exchange illustrates the point.

In his State of the Union Address of 1999, President Clinton stated that technology was producing many marvels, including machines that "translate as fast as you can speak." This statement prompted the following remarks, made

in a letter to President Clinton on January 31, 2000. The letter was sent by Ann G. Macfarlane, President of the American Translators Association. In it she stated that

Thanks to the historic economic expansion you have presided over in your years in office, there has never been a better time to be a translator or an interpreter. The market for language services is booming and the number of translators and interpreters is increasing everyday The American Public needs to know what a tricky, challenging and high-level task every translator and interpreter engages in when he or she sets to work. Please speak to this reality Please, don't build false hopes by talking of [translation] machines that are still, unfortunately, in the realm of fantasy-land—where they will remain for the indefinite future.

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES ACCORDING TO THE OLYMPIC CHARTER

Article 25 of the Olympic Charter addresses the "power and duties" of the IOC during the Olympic Games. Paragraph 6.10 states that the IOC

enacts, in the form it deems most appropriate, (codes, rulings, norms, guidelines, guides, instructions) all regulations necessary to ensure the proper implementation of the Olympic Charter and the organization of the Olympic Games. (1999)

The role of foreign languages during an Olympic Games is also defined in this official document. Article 27 of the Olympic Charter of the International Olympic Committee is entitled "Languages." It states that

1. The official languages of the IOC are French and English, 2. At all IOC Sessions, simultaneous interpretation into German, Spanish, Russian and Arabic must also be provided, 3. In the case of divergence between the French

and English text of the Olympic Charter and all other IOC documents, the French text shall prevail unless expressly provided otherwise in writing. (1999)

It is clear from reading the Olympic Charter that the role of foreign languages during the Olympic Games is a major concern to the IOC and that they have the power and duty to see that such concerns are met by the host city of the Olympic Games. During the Olympic Games, translators and interpreters are needed, and all modes of interpretation are called for. However, there is a big difference between providing these services as a professional and as a volunteer. The official team of translators and interpreters required by the IOC and the SLOC is composed of seasoned professionals who generally work with several languages and have experience with the terminology needed to cover the games. They also have the added experience of providing their services for other international meetings. Volunteers are recruited within the host city population. Official translators and interpreters who work for the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games are well paid for their services. Volunteer translators and interpreters are people who want to donate their time. Their services are not financially remunerated.

SLOC PLANS FOR COMPLIANCE

According to an article that appeared in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on February 7, 2000, the Salt Lake Organizing Committee has hired Bill Weber, an Olympic veteran, "to assemble a cadre of professional interpreters to deal with highly sensitive issues of the Games, and to help set up a testing and training system for larger groups of volunteer interpreters" (Gorell 2000).

Bill Weber heads Language Service International, which is "the only Language Service Corporation in the U.S. which is owned and managed by a

professional conference interpreter" (Language Services International 2000). Bill Weber and his team have provided interpretation services for the Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Barcelona, Sydney 2000, as well as the Winter Olympic Games in Nagano. Bill Weber himself has interpreted at seven Summer and Winter Olympic Games, starting with the Winter Olympics in Grenoble, France, in 1968. He grew up in a German-French household in the Bavarian region of Germany. He soon added English to his language proficiency and later learned to communicate in Dutch, Spanish, and Italian. He earned a degree in translation and conference interpretation at the University of Geneva in 1964 and spent fourteen years as the dean of the Translation and Interpretation Division at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California (*ibid.*). His credentials are well known in the academic and professional world of translation and interpretation.

The Salt Lake Organizing Committee has also created a web page (salt-lake2002.com) that lists an on-line section for "Volunteer Registration and General Information." This web page lists volunteer positions and describes the services volunteers need to provide. Under "Language Assistants/Interpreting," the following services are listed: "Provide interpreting services to assist athletes, officials and members of the Olympic/Paralympic Family. Interpreting experience is preferred." Under "Translation," the following is stated: "Provides translation services to assist athletes, officials and members of the Olympic Family. Official translation accreditation is preferred" (Salt Lake 2002 Volunteer 2000).

Note that both translation and interpretation job descriptions require experience and/or official accreditation. When this paper was presented to an audience of highly motivated prospective volunteers for the Salt Lake 2002 Olympic

Games, who also had experience with speaking a foreign language, the reaction was one of dismay. They thought of themselves as highly qualified individuals to be hired to provide translation and interpretation services simply because they "spoke" a foreign language. They had no idea that providing language services at the Olympic Games requires more than the ability to speak a foreign language. The *Salt Lake Tribune's* article of February 7, 2000, however, clearly states that "The Salt Lake Organizing Committee is developing a four-tier program to meet the demanding language-service needs at the Games. It has a ready-made talent pool because of the LDS Church's extensive missionary program. But simply having an ability to speak a foreign languages does not translate into being a good interpreter" (Gorell 2000).

EQUATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKING WITH TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

It is not unusual to find that translation and interpretation are often equated with the ability to speak a foreign language. There are several reasons why this notion is particularly prevalent among LDS people. For example, in an address to the National Press Club on March 8, 2000, in Washington, D.C., President Gordon B. Hinckley, head of the LDS Church, stated that

As you know, the Winter Olympics are coming to Salt Lake City in 2002. If requested, we shall have no trouble in offering capable translators and interpreters for the many languages that will be represented. I can walk down the streets of Salt Lake City and meet people who speak a score or more of languages—Spanish, Portuguese, German, French, Italian, Danish, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Albanian, Czech, Slovak, Serbian, Japanese, Chinese—both

Mandarin and Cantonese—Mongolian, Estonian, and various dialects of the Philippines, and what have you. I think it is a tremendous phenomenon. All have learned these languages while serving as missionaries." This impression is further echoed in a statement provided by the governor of Utah, Michael O. Leavitt, in the 2000 State of the State Address. In it he made reference to the 2002 Olympics and stated, "Let anyone who looks see the complete Olympic montage. . . . I see a photo album like no other: A volunteer directing traffic in Snowbasin; a street in Heber City bustling with tourists; welcome signs printed in a hundred different languages.

Clearly, both statements recognize the relationship of foreign languages and the Olympics. However, they also reflect the view that speaking a foreign language is enough to meet the needs of the IOC and the SLOC during the Olympic Games. This view, however, is not limited to people in Utah. It has been present in other Olympic Games. A February 4, 1998, Olympic Winter Games—Nagano article in the *ShinanoMainichi* newspaper is headed by the title, "7,000 Language Volunteers To Be Put to the Test." In it Ichiyo Kobayashi of the Nagano prefectural government's International Relations Division stated that "The success of the Feb. 7–22 Winter Games rests largely on the shoulders of the Game's 35,000 volunteers, and the ability of those volunteers to overcome language barriers is of the utmost importance" (*The ShinanoMainichi Newspaper*). A similar view is echoed in the fact sheet of February 2, 2000, on the official site of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. It states that "At 30 June 1995, 23 per cent of the Australian population was born overseas, while 13.7 per cent of Australians were born in non-English speaking countries" (*The multi cultural games*, April 2000). It also mentioned that over seventy languages were spoken, not including aboriginal languages, and that the

Organizing Olympic Committee in Sydney engaged the consultation of the Ethnic Affairs Commission and other equivalences to ensure that the volunteer program maximized the various language skills found in the community.

From statements such as those quoted above, it is obvious that no one disputes that language services are needed at the Olympic Games. What is not clearly understood is that the role foreign languages play at the Olympic Games is, at least, twofold. One role is played at the official level of the games, and another is played at the volunteer level. The official role of foreign languages at the games, according to the IOC charter and the SLOC response to it, is being met by the official appointment of highly trained professionals. The second role is being met by volunteers who provide language services as needed. The former requires experts in the field of translation and interpretation of official Olympic matters, who are very well paid for their work. The latter, on the other hand, requires being a volunteer with the ability to speak a foreign language. This position is not financially remunerated. That is not to say that volunteers are not compensated for their efforts.

According to the 2002 Volunteer Application information sheet on the Web, volunteers for the Salt Lake 2002 Olympics will "receive an Olympic or Paralympic uniform, a ticket to the dress rehearsal of the Opening Ceremony, food and beverages while working, free transportation to and from venues, and Olympic memorabilia upon completion of their assignment" (Team 2002: One Chance in a Lifetime, March 2000). In the Spring 1999 issue (1) of the *Volunteers* newsletter of the 2002 Salt Lake Olympic Games, a volunteer is described as a person who is generally 38 years old, "has previous volunteer experience and is proficient in a foreign language (41 per cent speak a language other than English)."

QUESTIONS TROUBLING BYU STUDENTS

It is evident that many BYU students are qualified for the role of volunteers. Many BYU students speak a foreign language and are willing to be a part of the Olympic Games. However, being a volunteer is no small matter, and it requires a great deal of commitment and resolve beyond the knowledge of a foreign language. Volunteers must meet many requirements, and BYU students wishing to meet those requirements may have to use a great deal of creativity.

The 2002 SLOC has stated that volunteers

have a better chance of being selected if their schedules are flexible—that is, they are available to work eight to ten-hour shifts any day of the week, including Saturday and Sunday, during the 17-day period (eleven business days) for the Olympic Winter Games or the 10-day period (six business days) for the Paralympic Winter Games. Regardless of their assignments, all Game volunteers must be willing to work under demanding conditions and committed to the success of the 2002 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (*Salt Lake 2002 Volunteer*, February 2000).

BYU students have asked themselves how they are going to meet these requirements. The question arises from information published by the *Deseret News*. In an article published February 4, 2000, Utahns were informed that

The three biggest universities in Utah have all decided, to one degree or another, to suspend course work during the Olympic Games. . . . In Utah County, the 50,000 students who attend Brigham Young University and Utah Valley State College will have to juggle their studies with any Olympic-watching or volunteer efforts in 2002. Classes will start the first week of January and continue uninterrupted for the

16-week semester, say officials at both schools.

In other words, BYU's students who wish to volunteer need to plan their Winter 2002 class schedule with classes offered during the second block of Winter Semester to be available during the 2002 Olympic Games. According to statements made by Noel Reynolds, BYU associate academic vice president for undergraduate education, "With the block system, the school can easily adjust the schedule of classes for students most likely to be involved in the Olympic activities." Reynolds said an estimated one thousand journalism, foreign language, performing arts, and physical education students from BYU plan to volunteer or work internships during the two-week world event.

BYU students have also expressed dismay at the fact that they don't seem to qualify for the jobs of translators and interpreters because they don't meet the requirements established by the IOC and the SLOC. Although they speak a foreign language, they are not accredited as translators or interpreters. However, there is still a way to use those talents. This paper has dealt mainly with the official role foreign languages play during the Olympic Games. However, the Olympic Games extend to more than Olympic events and, therefore, the need for language service specialists in the private sector is enormous. Any business catering to the thousands of visitors expected at the 2002 Olympics will, of necessity, need the assistance of speakers of foreign languages. This is where a person who speaks a foreign language really has a chance to provide a service that better meets the requirement of speaking a foreign language.

In conclusion, it is clear that human translators and interpreters will be needed during the 2002 Salt Lake Olympics. Utah has a large population of foreign language speakers. However, the language services required to support the

Olympics—at the official level or in the private sector—can only be met with proper training. It is clear that speaking a foreign language does not automatically qualify a person to translate or interpret. Speaking a foreign language is only the beginning in the long process of training required to perform the many tasks expected of a person who wishes to provide language services at an Olympic Games. And, above all, BYU students need to rely on a creative schedule if they wish to volunteer for the 2002 Olympics.

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