Teaching Beginners to Shut Up and Listen
(1992) The Interpreters' Newsletter, 4, 45-54.
by Sergio Viaggio, U.N.

What must interpreters (and translators) actually understand? The uneducated wisdom assumes it is the 'language,' as transpired in the specific text: the 'words.' Needless to say, if the interpreter does not understand the language, he is in deep trouble; but what if he does not understand **all** the words? What indeed if he does? The first thing a would-be interpreter should learn and assimilate is that there is a crucial difference between language and thought, meaning (linguistic) and sense (extra-linguistic). He should be made aware that language is never used for its own sake, but rather as a vehicle for ideas, i. e. 'sense,' It is those ideas, that sense, that must be captured and relayed. Nothing short of it, but --and this is essential-- **nothing more**. That sense will, of course, be **basically** carried by words; but a) not **all** the words, and b) not **just** the words. The students should be made aware that when we speak, we have all our body, vocal chords, facial muscles, fingers, etc. at our disposal. Thus, lots of information is carried para-linguistically, making for an additional source of redundancy. Moreover, not all that we actually say contributes equally to meaning or to sense. There always is a voluntary or involuntary degree of redundancy. Part of what we utter is the point we want to make, part of it just its bedding. Of the several points we may wish to get across, some are more important than others. All of this paragraph does not convey, in essence, anything more than 'we say more than we really need.'

Teaching the translator the difference between meaning and sense should be a matter of principle. Instilling it in the interpreter is one of survival. In interpretation, situationality is, by definition, shared by speaker, interpreter and both their respective audiences. Students are seldom, if ever, made aware of this circumstance and the way it can and should be exploited. Shared situationality, added to the orality of the spoken text, makes for a much higher degree of redundancy. The student should know, from the very beginning, that he cannot be expected to 'say it all,' nor should he demand it of himself either. He must realise that he is dealing with the competing efforts of comprehension, processing and production (brilliantly analysed by Gile

1985, 1988, 1990); that, initially, understanding will use up well nigh all of his attention, with little left for processing and next to nothing for delivery. That being the inescapable fact of life, he simply won't be able to 'say it all.' The question, then, is what **not** to say. This analytical discrimination demands intelligent listening: listening not for words, but for ideas (i.e **deverbalisation**). It further demands discrimination between ideas themselves; not only with a view to determine their relative importance (for the speaker and/**or** the interpreter's audience), but the degree to which they are not known already or conveyable by para-linguistic means, all of which makes their utterance --in principle-- redundant.

Intelligent listening being a difficult skill to master, I deem it essential to lay the ground for it by way of intelligent reading. In my courses, I try and kill several birds with one stone by combining this exercise with that of sight translation.[1] My students are required to sight translate a text ('saying it all'), next trim it down by some 20%, and then abridge it to its bare minimum informative content as perceived by the speaker and/**or** the audience. As for the bold **or**, it can happen that part of the information in a text is addressed primarily to those who can understand it in the original or a third language, but becomes less important, or even totally superfluous, to whomever is listening to a specific interpretation. A typical example from my U.N. practice: The delegate from Yemen congratulates the British chairman; the speaker wants the addressee to get all his flowers; the addressee wants them delivered intact; the Spanish audience don't care one bit. The English interpreter may not do away with them, but the Spanish interpreter can (again, not that he **should**). If speed were a big problem and the interpreter could not help using his scissors, the Spanish audience would much rather he discarded anything not having to do specifically with the position of Yemen, because that is exactly what they are listening for. (By the way, in the same emergency, the English interpreter should be well advised to do likewise, albeit at a greater risk of retaliation - in any event, let him be guided by his assessment of the situation, cross his fingers and hope for the best.) And if the interpreter were forced to cut even into that, then let him do away first with what he can assume his audience already know about Yemen's position.

It may be argued that any interpreter ought to translate 'everything' no matter what, it not being his job or his business to rate his speaker's ideas. The problem is

that very often it becomes simply impossible, especially for the beginner, let alone the student. What are they to do? Cut whenever short of breath? Intelligent listening is crucial to resource management; and when the interpreter's resources are scant, it pays double to administer them wisely. This, to my knowledge, is seldom **taught**, and both students and beginners are left to discover it on their own. As opposed to consecutive, in simultaneous interpretation, the time lapse between hearing and uttering is short enough for the magic seven last words to be still stored in the short-term semantic memory. It is possible, then, for the simultaneous interpreter to remember, translate and utter 'words.' Too bad, because it normally conspires against understanding, processing and conveying sense. Since, as mentioned, the first problem the student faces when trying his teeth is that of managing the three competing efforts of understanding, processing and delivering, I advocate tackling them in stages from first to third. There are, in my experience, two kinds of beginners: those who have a good comprehension of oral speech and those who find it somewhat difficult to work with oral as opposed to written texts. Many beginners who have started off as translators fall within this latter category. I advise them to take the time to get used to speech and its specific variables: diction, accent, perspicuity or incompetence, etc. It shouldn't normally take too long, provided the material is there to work with. The basic point is **not** to begin one's training until one has made certain that oral comprehension is no problem.

But even when oral comprehension poses no difficulty, every beginner stumbles upon trying to say it all without having bothered to understand any of it. It is, of course, less silly than it sounds. The beginner intuitively feels that those words are instantly vanishing from his memory: if he doesn't dispatch them right away, they'll be lost forever! What he is not aware of is that short-term semantic memory can be managed more efficiently if instead of using it to store 'words,' the interpreter employs it to organise chunks of sense, the *unités de sens* so (justifiably) dear to the Parisians. An example I use in my classes is the following: I ask my students to try and remember at first hearing 49 unconnected digits, say *1 3 6 8 9 9 1 2 8 5 6 4 3 8 9 5 6 9* etc.; there is absolutely no way they can do it. Then I show them how if they had been asked, instead, to remember a list with the names of seven friends, they will almost certainly be able to recall them, and with them the forty nine digits of their

telephone numbers. What happens is that each series of seven digits becomes one number, and therefore a single unit of information (interchangeable with, say, the nickname of the person) to be stored up in the short term memory. Next I attempt a related experiment. I ask them to memorise on first reading the following numbers: *1 9 1 4 1 9 1 8 1 9 3 9 1 9 4 5*. Whoever manages to store World Wars has no problem. What he did was reduce the 16 digits to four numbers to two concepts to one unit of sense. It should have been more difficult than going from the friends' names to their telephones, since it took more processing. The students had to make 'sense' out of those numbers, turn them into concepts. If for whatever reason they failed to do exactly that, chances are they could not remember all of them. Notice that this kind of association is anything but linguistic: it has to do, not with our familiarity with the language (the numbers are in no specific language!), but with our knowledge of the world; not with the dictionary, but with the encyclopaedia. We are relating and processing conceptual information which at either end of the decoding recoding channel can and normally does acquire linguistic form.

Comprehension works very much the same way. The easier it is to reduce the myriad sounds or graphic imprints to linguistic signs (the ability to understand oral or written speech), the easier it becomes to make out the linguistic meaning of the utterance (the ability to understand the language); and the sooner the words and constructions can be reduced to units of sense (the ability to understand texts), the sooner and more accurately can the hearer/reader make out the message, i.e. the sense being conveyed, at which point the student won't need the words anymore (and too bad if he does, because he simply shall not be able to remember them). Indeed, the reverse is even truer: an idea of what the message is about will go a longer way in helping deciphering the phonic chain than will phonetic analysis. The right approach is to speak not in terms of sentences (linguistic) but of propositions (logical); linguistic decoding becomes therefore discourse analysis: understanding the message rather than the words. Now, as we saw with our numbers above, inferring sense requires establishing a conceptual relationship between the linguistic and the extra linguistic. The beginner must be taught to do precisely this; he must, from the very start and always ever after, be listening for sense. It is not that easy, though, in view of the many other things he thinks he's got to do at the same time:

Understanding **all** the words, remembering **all** the words, translating **all** the words, and saying **all** the words, while understanding, remembering and translating **all** the words that have meanwhile come in. With so many tasks in hand, who's got spare time to make out sense! The student ought to be weaned from words right away. There is no alternative.

Moreover, the beginner (and would that only the beginner!) tends to cling to forms, not even semantic meaning: as soon as he believes he has grasped a word he spits out the first dictionary equivalent that comes to his fretted mind. Syntax gets appallingly shortchanged and sense more often than not distorted or altogether lost. There is only one way for him to make out sense: shut up and listen for it. Now, one can hardly convey a sense one has not grasped to begin with. True, occasionally, word substitution can do the trick, but only at times and then awkwardly. To boot, word substitution is too long and cumbersome a process. There are always many shortcuts to sense; the interpreter must train himself to find them quickly and take them without fear. Since understanding gets top priority, he must do more listening than talking, and **NEVER** allow himself to open his mouth without being reasonably sure of what he is going to say, i.e. without a plan, a strategy, which will of necessity be conscious. His plan may very well consist in NOT 'saying' anything, just fill in what would otherwise be too long a silence with phatic language, or, better still, with information that can be safely disposed of without burning any bridges, while waiting for more 'circumstantial evidence' of the speaker's communicative intentions.

The bane of the beginner is that he starts talking too soon and that he talks too much. Both go hand in hand, since if he waits longer, he won't be able to talk that long. He must be taught, nay, forced to listen, and to listen the right way. His constant concern should be: what is the speaker saying? why? what does he expect to achieve by it? Unless the discourse analyst is constantly at work, the linguist cannot hear sense. Shortly after the 1987 earthquake in Mexico City, I had brought with me to Havana dozens of speeches taped during that session of the General Assembly; needless to say, every single one of them began with the ritual dithyrambs to the President and the Secretary General, immediately followed by the condolences about the tragedy. Nine beginners --and a couple of veterans-- out of ten ended up congratulating the Mexicans on their earthquake. Many of them did not

even realise it until they actually heard themselves over the loudspeakers. (A double miss: not only didn't they care whether the speaker was making any sense, they didn't bother to make it themselves.)[2] The interpreters had taken the speaker for granted ("Let me congratulate you, Mr. President... I should also like to express my thanks and appreciation to our Secretary-General... I must as well add my condolences to the Government and people of Mexico..."). Unable to remember **all** the words, they retained 'Government and people of Mexico' and missed 'condolences' altogether. That, though, should not have been any problem. Back then, a few weeks after the horrible event, Mexico was synonymous with earthquake. The moment one heard 'Mexico', one knew --or should have known-- that the earthquake was looming in the next clause. But since most of my students were not 'thinking,' i.e. having 'sense' in mind, they never paused to ponder what the Government and people of Mexico were doing in the illustrious company of the President of the General Assembly and the Secretary-General. The sheer mention of Mexico should have played the trick we used to retrieve numbers: it acts with respect to the expression of condolences in a way analogous to 1939-1945 in connection to World War II; it activates the relevant chunk of our knowledge of the world, as it does for the interpreter's audience: it activates **their** knowledge, and that is precisely the reason why the interpreter, like any speaker, is normally able to get away with practically any 'activating' formula.

Some of my students tried to excuse themselves by complaining that 'at that speed' they did not have the time to think. They failed to realise that they did indeed: once one has understood the one word 'Mexico,' 'to the Government and people of,' 'condolences,' and 'I would be remiss to my humanitarian duty if I failed to express my deep' are of no avail, regardless of whether the interpreter has understood and/or remembered them: any expression of sympathy will do, the shorter the better. Naturally, this is a very special case. It happens at the very beginning of the speech, it does not require --in that situation, i.e. back then-- a profound analysis, and it does not really matter how it is linguistically solved. Things become much harder when we are dealing, not with the niceties of polite society, but with the meat of an argument.

---

[2] In Seleskovitch's accurate aphorism, students must learn 'to balance their listening between *hearing sense* on the one hand and *hearing their own speech make sense* on the other hand.' (1989, p. 74; my italics)

Granted. But the method to approach and solve both types of instances is the same, and, as with everything else, one should learn by first applying it when it is easier.

I am in no way suggesting that words actually used by the speaker or the interpreter (or, indeed, the translator) **never** matter. Far from it. What I am saying, though, is that their relevance is secondary to the sense they are meant to make, and that, when confronted with the impossibility of rendering **both** words and sense, the interpreter **must invariably choose the latter over the former**. In this respect, I am as adamant as the most recalcitrant Parisians. It follows, therefore, that the beginner is to be taught to opt systematically for sense, both as a listener and as a speaker. Let him also remember there will always be more words than actually needed to convey sense, be it because the language structurally necessitates them, or because the speaker is being repetitive or expansive, either out of a legitimate rhetorical choice or through sheer incompetence. It is the job of the interpreter to pursue that sense, grasp it, and then convey it. These three tasks are the non-linguistic counterparts of analysing acoustical perceptions in order to detect linguistic forms, processing the latter, and producing new linguistic material. The perception and analysis of speech should be as automatic as possible - the seasoned interpreter will stop to become aware of words only when unable to 'gloss' over them and proceed directly from sound to sense. Next comes the elaboration of the interpreter's own elocution plan; he has linguistically to inform this sense (if possible **and** necessary --it may be immaterial-- with the closest form, semantically and stylistically). Lastly comes utterance, with particular attention to intonation and pitch, which can be used to convey modal information and mark coherence suprasegmentally: "I therefore vehemently oppose" may become "[pause] NO!" (more about that in my next paper).

I mentioned the three competing efforts. Astonishingly enough, I have come across at least one colleague who believes it to be nonsense. A simple introspection will suffice, I hope, to prove they are there all right, and very much vying with each other, to boot. When we have trouble with the quality of the acoustic input, be it because the speaker is looking away from the microphone, or because his accent is thick, in short, when there is 'noise' in the channel, we press the earphones (both of them, for once) to our temples, seal our eyelids, sit on the edge of our seats and...

shut up. As soon as we decipher enough linguistic information, we squeeze sense out of it and send a telegramme, something like: "... I ... agree ... with ... France." How many times this is what the audience is left with out of a speech that went "Witu regardsu to dah commantsu ovu pleviuspekah's ploposu we bereave to be positivu." How the deuce can we decode that as "With regards to the comments of the previous speaker's proposal, we believe to be positive," which in turn has to be understood to mean "With regard to the proposal made by the previous speaker during his comments, we believe it is positive," without shutting up and listening tight? What time will there be left to say "*En cuanto a la propuesta que el orador anterior formulara en el curso de sus comentarios, creemos que es positiva*?"[3]

Listening has used up almost all of our time and effort; processing, about seventy percent of whatever is left; elocution has to make do with three or four words. I submit the beginner finds himself in such an extreme situation at every turn. For him, most phrases sound like the above one; he has no alternative, then, but to do as we do in those circumstances: shut up and listen, think hard and say little. And if he is left with no time to say anything at all, let him not say anything at all then: in interpreter training the alternative to the right interpretation is not a wrong one, but none whatsoever. Death by silence is better and more dignified than death by inanity. Besides, the beginner ought to know that the teacher is aware of his predicament and sympathises with him. Silence, on its part, should never mean idleness, but quiet and hard work: trying to understand, seeking to make out sense. If no sense could be made out, there is simply nothing to say.

---

[3]A most 'unfaithful' rendering, by the way, since abhorrent Japglish has been turned into elaborate Spanish. I dare my colleagues of the 'literalist' persuasion to reproduce that style in public!

In the case of the mention of 'Mexico' --as in the example of the unintelligible speaker-- though faced with different problems altogether, the interpreter puts to work the same method: he looks for sense. In the first instance, 'Mexico' alone, regardless of its linguistic embedding, is enough to infer the **proposition** behind the utterance ('the earthquake in Mexico is a very sad thing'); he does not need the rest of the words, unless he is out to come up with a formally closer translation (totally unnecessary in this specific situation, even with the Mexican delegation themselves among the audience). In the second one, no single word is enough; indeed, no single word is easily **identified**; careful and concentrated listening allows to decipher one word here and another there, but not on the basis of phonic resemblance alone; rather, the interpreter sifts what he hears through what he knows; phonic resemblance, as a matter of fact, enters into play *ex post facto*: 'bereave' sounds much more like 'bereave' than like 'believe,' but since it does not make sense, the interpreter doesn't even consider 'bereave' and goes on with his search.[4] To begin with he knows the most important thing: the speaker is not crazy; he is definitely trying to make some sense, counting --as every normal speaker in any normal situation-- on his audience willingness to understand. As a keenly interested listener, the interpreter is more than eager to understand; unlike any other interlocutor, he cannot simply dismiss the speaker as incompetent; he gives him the utmost benefit of the doubt. He knows that the speaker is trying to 'say' something, which can be reduced to a proposition or to a hierarchical series of propositions. The semantic clues are 'previous speaker,' 'proposal' and 'positive.' Part of the interpreter's knowledge of the situation is that the previous speaker has been the delegate of France; therefore, what the speaker is trying to say is that he agrees with the proposal by France. **That** is the proposition, **that** --and, in the circumstances, **just that**-- is all the interpreter needs to know and be able to say. The communication has, therefore, been assured and the interpreter has succeeded at his job. It is precisely what he is being paid for! Notice that this achievement has been possible **despite** the language. It would have been much easier if the speaker had merely nodded in assent: his gesture would have been much clearer than his English.

---

[4]A thick foreign accent is, precisely, the example Gile (1989) cites as one of the triggerers of 'deficitary' concatenations.

Am I asserting that students ought never to open their mouths unless they are absolutely certain that they have thoroughly understood the speaker's sense and have thought out their own utterance? Yes indeed, until deverbalisation becomes automatic. We, veterans, know when we can get away with things and when we cannot; when it is unethical to lie and when it is equally unethical not to come up with an educated guess. And we should let our students in on that. But they cannot normally allow themselves such liberty, they have to discipline themselves into listening for and making sense. Picasso did not draw square faces simply because he could not manage to draw them round: our students will acquire the right to bend the rules only once they have fully mastered them.

There is, to my mind, only one kind of situation in which the student can be allowed --and even encouraged-- to 'lie,' and that is when he has started talking and hasn't gotten the foggiest idea of where he's going. In that case yes, the phrase must be finished, well and soon, and, most important, non-committally. In other words, the beginner realises that he **has lied already**: he has spoken as if he knew what to say and now discovers he does not; his three choices are a) to go on lying and say any monstrosity, b) to cut himself short in mid-clause and die, or c) to finish the sentence. It is the only time I advise my students against shutting up: when it is already too late. The only antidote is not to speak out too soon.

... AND THEN TO ABSTRACT AND COMPRESS

Reference has been tacitly made to Grice's maxims of conversation; that analysis and its development by, among others, Austin, Searle, Katz, Fodor and, more recently and relevantly to our profession, van Dijk and Brown & Yule, proves invaluable. It reorients our search away from words and towards sense. Needless to say, good interpreters are perfectly able to do exactly that without any theoretical scaffolding, although a solid scientific base would go a long way to make them even better. The didactician, on the other hand, simply cannot do without it: in order to explain the need to listen for sense, he needs to be able himself to establish the distinction and use it. Never mind, of course, whether he has actually read Grice (I, for one, have not), or any of the others - let alone ask the students to do so, but he

must be able to operate with the concepts, otherwise he won't be in a position to instill them. There is always a reason to do or not to do things; its explanation --any explanation-- is, by definition, theoretical; the didactician can, if he chooses, come up with his own insights and terminology, but what's the point of re-inventing and re-naming the wheel? Most of these things have been studied, systematised and baptised already and the literature is out there.

At times --and much more infrequently than most practitioners believe-- it is indeed necessary to 'say it all;' what with all those Presidents and Prime Ministers and media pundits, who would dare reduce Mikhail Gorbachov's speech to its macropropositions? Every listener is clinging to his earphones, trying not to miss any single word or turn of phrase. Yet I submit that, unless the interpreter or any other listener is very much mindful precisely of the sequence and hierarchy of macropropositions and propositions, he's bound to get lost and miss or betray sense. And I've got proof: During his speech before the United Nations, Gorbachov criticised at one point a certain assertion by stating '*Eto sosud bez soderzhanija*'; the English interpreter properly rendered it as 'This is an empty vessel,' whereas I gave some vent to my poetic imagination and came up with '*Este es un continente sin contenido.*' The Spanish verbatim reporters, who did not know Russian, later compared my Spanish version with the English one and noticed the discrepancy; I was duly corrected on the spot, whereupon Gorbachov ended up saying '*Esta es una embarcación vacía*' ('this is an empty boat')! If you do not care about sense, words will lead you astray.

'Saying it all' means conveying the whole of the same sense with as many of the stylistic and semantic nuances as can be possibly reproduced on the spot without abusing one's target language. 'Saying it all' presupposes, first and foremost, 'understanding it all,' and who can 'understand it all' unless he has understood the gist and general drift of the speaker's speech? No one --and most certainly no beginner-- will be able to 'say it all' who cannot make out the basic propositions; whereas any good interpreter will at times find it impossible to 'say it all,' but always manage to convey all of the sense.

Abstracting and compressing[5] are essential skills to overcome the students' nemesis: the 'he's-going-too-fast-for-me' syndrome. Nonsensical, sweaty, fidgety blabbering becomes poised enunciation. At their first few sittings, I insist that students say only what they have understood, even at the risk of missing nine out of every ten sentences. Ten isolated sentences out of a full speech may be too little, I tell them, but it is something; one thousand disconnected words is nothing. Neither, of course, is enough; but the former is ostensibly saner. The next thing they must try, therefore, is to string those sentences together, to make them cohere. (At which point they are told about cohesion and coherence.) That is their first proto-abstract.

Sometimes concepts of abstracting and compressing get mixed up. Abstracting is cognitive, akin to precis writing, the stuff consecutive interpretation is made of. It requires a very thorough analysis of the text with a view to a rigorous hierarchical tiering of its content. Precisely because of that, it cannot be mastered 'on the go' and necessitates, therefore, the whole communicative or functional 'perspective' of the text. One more reason for interpreters to step on the same stones as translators before parting ways. Needless to say, it is the first step of the two. If abstracting implies 'content-slicing,' compressing is, in the final analysis, but mere 'syllable-shrinking.' It requires, on top of the ability to understand the content, adroitness at condensing the form. It is more a matter of linguistic competence, of being able to find the briefest and aptest ways of expression. Again, it cannot be mastered 'on the go;' translators and interpreters still belong in the same classroom.

Since there is little point in wasting in the seeking the time saved in the uttering, students must make a habit of having the most economical word or turn on the tip of their tongues: the shortest synonym of '*después*,' for instance, is '*tras*,' which not only is half as long, but does not demand the '*de*,' which makes it two thirds shorter. The absolute gerund or participle, on the other hand, makes its lexicalisation unnecessary: '*Tras la muerte de Mao,...*' ['After Mao's death,...'] takes six syllables, against just three for '*Muerto Mao,...*' [With Mao dead,...']; double negatives (lexical or semantic) add to an affirmative: if '*nadie debe dejar de verla*'

---

[5] Different authors use different terms ('abridging,' 'summarising,' 'abstracting,' 'condensing,' 'compressing,' etc.). I have chosen 'compressing' after Chernov (1987). I suggest the first three can be used for 'semantic' and the latter two for 'phonetic' economy.

['nobody must miss it'] then '*deben verla todos*' ['everybody should see it'] (nine syllables to six).

    We now proceed to a practical example. The following is the beginning of a speech delivered before the UN Disarmament Commission on May 3, 1989:

"Mr. Chairman, as we are about to conclude this year's session of the UN Disarmament Commission, my delegation would like to make some general observations concerning the work of the Commission. We do so noting with regret that the Commission has not been able to reach agreement on any of the items on the agenda. The UNDC held its first substantive session in May 1979 - ten years ago. Some of the items in this year's agenda have been discussed at each UNDC session for ten consecutive years, without the Commission being able to bring the work on these items to a successful conclusion. It seems to us that the UNDC has gradually ground to a halt on virtually all the main issues on its agenda. This should give all of us food for serious reflection. The idea behind reviving the UNDC at the First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978 --as I recall it-- was to establish a global forum where all Member States would be given the opportunity to take active part in deliberations on disarmament matters; to establish a forum where all Member States could conduct an in-depth discussion on current disarmament affairs; a forum where they could articulate and argue their case. We should ask ourselves whether the UNDC, as it now works, really does serve such a purpose."

    Let us look first a basic feature: although orally transmitted, this is a 'written' text, its redundancy intentional and limited. It would also have been read both at a greater speed and less naturally than if it had been improvised on the spot. Second; it was obviously written by somebody who is not a native speaker of English, or in any event not terribly good at using it. This is a blessing in disguise: we shall feel freer to tinker with the style. I will not attempt to make a thorough analysis; the point made is clearly expressed and easily lifted up from its linguistic and semantic cushions. But let me tell the reader unfamiliar with the U.N. what the Spanish

interpreter (himself more than conversant with the subject) can expect his audience to know about the situation. The UNDC is the only U.N. body dealing specifically with disarmament; the U.N. General Assembly has held several special sessions on specific subjects, the one mentioned here is the first of three devoted to disarmament; the speech was being delivered at a moment of reflection upon and evaluation of the work done and the results achieved; it was also one of many that day devoted precisely to the work of the UNDC itself; it was not the only one bewailing the state of affairs. Everybody in the room was perfectly aware of all this and much more; they had heard this delegate many times; they knew him and knew his country's position on this and every other aspect of the issue. The country is a large donor of development aid, and is respected by North and South (our parlance for developed and developing world) and East and West. In a word: when this speaker spoke, people perked up. Here is a possible translation into Spanish:

"*Sr. Presidente, en momentos en que el período de sesiones de este año de la Comisión de Desarme de las Naciones Unidas toca a su fin, mi delegación desearía formular algunas observaciones generales acerca de la labor de la Comisión. Lo hacemos tomando nota con pesar de que la Comisión no ha podido llegar a acuerdo respecto de ninguno de los temas de su programa. La CDUN celebró su primer período de sesiones substantivo en mayo de 1979, hace diez años. Algunos de los temas del programa de este año han venido debatiéndose en cada período de sesiones de la CDUN durante diez años consecutivos, sin que la Comisión pudiese llevar a feliz término los trabajos relativos a ninguno de los temas. Nos parece que la CDUN poco a poco ha ido aminorando su marcha hasta detenerse por completo respecto de prácticamente todos los temas principales de su programa. Ello debiera llamarnos a todos a reflexionar seriamente. El propósito con que, en 1978, se dio nuevo impulso a la CDUN durante el Primer Período Extraordinario de Sesiones dedicado al Desarme --que yo recuerde-- era crear un foro mundial donde todos los Estados Miembros tuvieran oportunidad de participar activamente en las deliberaciones de asuntos de desarme, crear un foro en el que todos los Estados Miembros pudiesen realizar un debate a fondo de los*

asuntos corrientes de desarme, un foro en que pudieran expresar y defender su posición. Cabría que nos preguntáramos si, como marcha, la CDUN sirve efectivamente a tal fin."

The above is a good 'semantic' translation (full, and as close as possible as the target language will allow), the type Peter Newmark suggests for this sort of texts. I think it can be improved by making it less awkward than the original. For instance:

"*Sr. Presidente, ahora que este período de sesiones de la CDUN toca a su fin, mi delegación desearía formular algunas observaciones generales acerca de su labor. Lo hacemos tomando nota con pesar de que la Comisión no ha podido llegar a acuerdo respecto de ninguno de lo temas de su programa. La CDUN celebró su primer período de sesiones substantivo en mayo de 1979, hace diez años. Algunos de los temas del programa de este año han venido debatiéndose en cada período de sesiones de la CDUN durante diez años consecutivos, sin que la Comisión haya podido llevar a feliz término los trabajos relativos a ninguno de los temas. A nuestro juicio, la CDUN poco a poco ha ido aminorando su marcha hasta detenerse por completo respecto de prácticamente todos los temas principales de su programa. Sería bueno que todos nos pusiéramos a reflexionar seriamente por qué. El propósito con que, en 1978, se dio nuevo impulso a la CDUN durante el Primer Período Extraordinario de Sesiones dedicado al Desarme --que yo recuerde-- era crear un foro mundial donde todos los Estados Miembros tuvieran oportunidad de participar activamente en las deliberaciones de asuntos de desarme, crear un foro en el que todos los Estados Miembros pudiesen realizar un debate a fondo de los asuntos del momento, un foro en que pudieran expresar y defender su posición. Cabría que nos preguntáramos si, como marcha, la CDUN sirve efectivamente a tal fin.*"

Better, right? And yet... But can we go on improving? Not without becoming 'communicative,' I'm afraid. Now let us compare numbers: original text, 220 words;

first translation, 250 (a good 14% more); second translation, 230 (still some 5% more). Some researchers would stop here;[6] but I think a next step shall prove most revealing: Original text, 360 **syllables**; first translation, 500 (40% more!!!!); second translation, 460 (27% more!); and that is making every possible synalepha, down to /*periodo*/ and /*criar*/, plus counting CDUN as /*zedún*/. Other things being equal (and they are not!), it would take the interpreter roughly 30% more time to utter the shorter version than it would take the speaker to finish his speech.[7] Either the interpreter steamrolls his translation at almost twice the speed (which may be possible, but at the cost of intelligibility) or he compresses. What if the text had been less obviously redundant?

> "Mr. Chairman, as we are about to conclude this year's session of the UNDC, my delegation would like to make some general observations concerning **its** [the] work [of the Commission]. We do so noting with regret that the Commission has not been able to reach agreement on any items on its agenda. The UNDC held its first substantive session in May 1979 [- ten years ago]. Some of the items in this year's agenda have been discussed at each UNDC session for ten [consecutive] years, without the Commission being able to bring the work on **them** [these items] to a successful conclusion. It seems to us that the UNDC has gradually ground to a halt on virtually all **its** [the] main issues [on its agenda]. This should give all of us food for serious reflection. The idea behind reviving the UNDC at the First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978 --as I recall it-- was to establish a global forum where all Member States would be given the opportunity to take active part in

---

[6]Chernov (1987), Lederer (1981), and Seleskovitch (1981), (1984) and (1989) talk about words per minute. Alone among all my sources, Chernov introduces the concept of syllable amount - and only tacitly at that. In view of the obvious difference in average syllables per word in English, French, Italian, Russian and Spanish (the languages I know something about), I believe 'word' is too misleading a unit (and though I know no German, I've seen a few 'words', not to speak about Welsh). As far as the examples quoted here --and the ones in Chernov-- it is more than obvious that such is the case; but I would be the last one to construct a theory on a few random cases.

[7]My colleague, Lynn Visson, has pointed out to me that the average amount of syllables typically uttered at any given speech 'tempo' is probably not the same in all languages. According to Chernov's sources, the average syllable duration for most of the European languages is 200 milliseconds. If that is indeed the case, there would be no significant difference between English and Spanish; but even if there were, I imagine the numbers would vary depending on what dialect we pick. I do still think, though, that 30% more syllables means a lot of extra parroting no matter how glibber we Spanish speakers may be (and we cannot squeeze 'satellite' into /sadlit/!).

deliberations on disarmament matters; [to establish a forum where all Member States could] conduct an in-depth discussion on current disarmament affairs; **and** [a forum where they could] articulate and argue their case. We should ask ourselves whether the UNDC, as it now works, really does serve such a purpose."

We have thus saved almost 40 syllables, a nice 10%. What would our second translation end up like thus amended?

"*Sr. Presidente, ahora que este período de sesiones de la CDUN toca a su fin, mi delegación desearía formular algunas observaciones generales acerca de su labor. Lo hacemos tomando nota con pesar de que la Comisión no ha podido llegar a acuerdo respecto de ninguno de lo temas de su programa. La CDUN celebró su primer período de sesiones substantivo en mayo de 1979 [hace diez años]. Algunos de los temas [del programa] de este año han venido debatiéndose en cada período de sesiones de la CDUN durante diez años [consecutivos], sin que la Comisión pudiese llevar a feliz término los trabajos sobre [relativos a] ninguno [de ellos]. A nuestro juicio, la CDUN poco a poco ha ido aminorando su marcha hasta detenerse por completo respecto de prácticamente todos los temas principales de su programa. Sería bueno que todos nos pusiéramos a reflexionar seriamente por qué. El propósito con que, en 1978, se dio nuevo impulso a la CDUN durante el Primer Período Extraordinario de Sesiones dedicado al Desarme --que yo recuerde-- era crear un foro mundial donde todos los Estados Miembros tuvieran oportunidad de participar activamente en las deliberaciones de asuntos de desarme, [crear un foro en el que todos los Estados Miembros pudiesen] realizar un debate a fondo de los asuntos del momento y [un foro en que] pudieran expresar y defender su posición. Cabría que nos preguntáramos si, como marcha, la CDUN sirve efectivamente a tal fin.*"

Only 40 syllables saved (we had already introduced some of the improvements from the very beginning); the translation becomes now over 30%

longer than the original. Without its awkwardness and a couple of non-awkward redundant elements, the original proves even more unmanageable. But are all those words and syllables really necessary? No more than all the words and syllables in this paper. How many times have I said the same thing, over and over (and I'm not finished yet!)? Of course, the speaker and I are not stupid, nor do we believe our interlocutors to be. But what is it that he is really saying; what is his **point**? A rather simple one: the UNDC is far from working as well as it should. A Spanish version thereof would simply be: '*Sr. Presidente, la CDUN no marcha.*' No interpreter in his right mind would dream of paring the text down to that (unless he realises he has neglected to turn on the mike and that is the only alternative to omitting this paragraph altogether - and it happens!). Or unless he is not a full-fledged interpreter at all, but a wretched student, drawn into an uneven struggle against nerves, insecurity, lack of habit, inexperience, a dismal speed, a dreadful accent, an implacable teacher, and cruel classmates. Would this not be preferable to something more or less like the following:

"*Sr. Presidente, en la medida que la sesión de la Comisión de las Naciones Unidas no ha podido del programa en mayo de 1879 en conclusión exitosa nos parece que se detuvo su agenda para alimentar la reflexión seria del período extraordinario de sesiones dedicado al desarme para participar activamente en un foro de desarme corriente y no sirve para ese propósito.*"

("Mr. Chairman, as the session of the United Nations Committee has not been able the agenda in May 1879 to a successful conclusion it seems to us it ground to a halt its agenda to food for reflection would be the Special Session on Disarmament was to take active participation in a current disarmament forum and does not really serve such a purpose.")

If our student had properly understood what is really expected of him, he would have **waited** until he had grasped the main **idea** and only **then** said it in **two words**, hoping to be able, next time around, to couch it in four. But he would have come up with a **text**, scanty, insufficient, but **basically accurate** and **plausible**. The

one above, instead, is hopeless. Now let's get back to us veterans. Can we trim our translation without cutting off any of the meat?

"*Señor, ahora que este período de sesiones de la CDUN toca a su fin, desearíamos formular algunas observaciones generales lamentando que la Comisión no haya podido convenir en ninguno de lo temas de su programa. La CDUN celebro su primer período substantivo hace diez años. Algunos de los temas llevan debatiéndose esos diez años sin que la Comisión haya podido evacuar ninguno. En casi todos los principales, nos parece, la CDUN poco a poco se ha estancado. Pensemos por qué. En el 78 la Asamblea le dio nuevo impulso --que yo recuerde-- para crear un foro mundial donde todos los Estados pudieran participar activamente en las deliberaciones de desarme, debatir a fondo los asuntos pertinentes y expresar y defender su posición. Preguntémonos si, como marcha, la CDUN sirve efectivamente a tal fin.*" [250 syllables!]

("Sir, at the end of this UNDC session, we would like to make some general observations, while lamenting that the Commission has not been able to agree about any of the items. The UNDC held its first substantive session ten years ago. Some of the items have been discussed over those ten years without the Commission being able to finish any of them. With respect to almost all the main ones, we believe, it has gradually bogged down. Let us think why. Back in '78, the Assembly revived it --as I recollect-- to establish a forum where all States could take part in deliberations on disarmament, discuss in depth relevant affairs, and articulate and argue their case. Let us ask ourselves whether the Commission, as it works, does really serve that purpose." [210 syllables])

We might as well take a look at a possible abstracting relying on the knowledge of the situation shared by speaker, interpreter and audience:

"*Señor. No hemos podido convenir ni un tema, y eso que algunos llevan diez años debatiéndose.)Por qué nos hemos estancado tanto?*

La Comisión tenía un propósito: que todos pudiéramos debatir a fondo
el desarme. Como marcha)lo puede conseguir?"

("Sir. We haven't been able to agree on any of our items, even though we've been discussing some of them for ten years. Why have we virtually ground to a halt? The Commission had one purpose: that we should all be able to discuss disarmament in depth. Can it achieve it the way it's going?" [75 syllables])

Syllables... 80!! Relevant information embezzled... NONE! Stylistic sacrifices incurred... you must be kidding! Countenance of the Ecuadorean Ambassador who's been trying to remember the position of that particular country in order to relay it by telex to Quito that evening... elated! Look in the Spanish press officer who has to take down everything... blissful! Ideally, of course, the interpreter would be able to do this text both ways. Which one to choose will naturally depend on the situation. Between these extremes lies his path: If he says more, he'll be lying; if he says less, he will be cheating.

It may be argued that the above is a 'political,' i.e. non-technical, speech, and that redundancy tends, therefore, to be more rife, and even if it is not, who cares anyway? It is true indeed that technical presentations are prone to be less redundant. Precisely because of that, whatever redundancy there is simply **must** be taken full advantage of. But technical speeches more often than not offer a different, crucial kind of advantage: the presence of para-linguistic information, shared by both interpreter and his audience, under the guise of images (slides, graphs, etc.). The latter duplicates information linguistically conveyed and can be counted as a substitute thereof. Take the following example: At a seminar on open-heart surgery, a doctor is explaining a specific operation. There is a rather gory slide showing the poor patient's innards in all their splendour. The speaker has his pointer held at a specific spot while saying '*Practicamos nuestra incisión en la vena cava*.' Every physician in the audience knows that **that** is a vein, and that it is called '*vena cava*,' If the interpreter translates 'We make our incision *here*,' he is omitting linguistic information made redundant by the image. Not that he should, of course, but he

most definitely can; and if he does not know the right term in English, he will be very well advised indeed not to give away his ignorance by saying something preposterous or, worse, misleading. He will have earned his bread by translating the purely linguistic --and therefore inaccessible to those who do not understand the language-- part of the message, while leaving the technical to the eyes of the specialists.[8]

We might now take a look at what a real-life text could hold in store. The following is part of a presentation by the Technical Adviser to the U.S. Delegation at the U.N. Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space on the agenda item 'Spin-offs of Space Science and Technology':

---

[8]Two cases in point: 1) This year (1989) I was assigned without prior warning to a committee of experts on accounting. My audience consisted of two Argentines, one Uruguayan and a Peruvian. I approached them and alerted them to the fact that I had no knowledge of the Spanish terminology. They said "Don't worry; we don't know English, but we understand the English terms; just use them." I promised I'd do my best, but trembled before the idea of what Russian might have in store. As it turned out, the Soviet delegate also used the English terms. And he explained why: "I know they may be difficult for the interpreters, and I want to be understood." 2) A couple of years ago I was doing my beloved Outer Space Scientific and Technical Subcommittee. The Soviet speech was a model of clarity and was being blissfully delivered. Easy as apple pie. But all of a sudden I simply could not think of the Spanish word for '*detalizatsia*'... My mind just went blank. So I concocted '*detallación*' and went ahead. As soon as I finished I managed to add "I know there's no such word as '*detallación*,' but I couldn't think of the right one." My audience lifted up their eyes, smiled and nodded. Ah, the mirth of shared situationality!

"A final biomedical spin-off example involves the use of NASA-developed digital image processing technology. Magnetic Resonance (MR) imaging is a relatively new technique for viewing the inner parts of the human body. Unlike X-rays, which are most sensitive to bone, magnetic resonance is sensitive to softer tissue of the body - like the brain. By using the same computer software and image processing methods developed by NASA for enhancing satellite imagery, medical technicians can now process MR images and more readily distinguish such anomalies as blood clots and tumors from healthy surrounding tissue. NASA-developed computer programs analyze digital information obtained from MR body scans, sharpen contrasts of different tissue, eliminate confusing detail and produce images in which various features are shown in different color. Such 'issue maps' now enable more rapid and early diagnosis of many internal physiological disorders than ever before."

Now for the situation: This was the Outer Space Committee. This interpreter and the audience were not familiar with medicine, nor were they expecting this kind of subject (and vocabulary) to show up. The speaker used a projector to illustrate his intervention. The slides shown more or less matched the different descriptions in the text. For instance, the process of colour-differentiation mentioned in the last but one sentence was clearly shown by way of the 'normal' and 'coloured' versions of the same image. The speaker read awkwardly and at an infelicitous speed. All of the presentation referred to NASA-developed technology. This was the way I managed to do it:

"*Un último caso es nuestra tecnología de procesamiento digital de imágenes por resonancia magnética (RM). Se trata de una técnica novel que permite ver el interior del organismo. A diferencia de los rayos X, la RM es sensible a los tejidos blandos, como el cerebral. Con los programas y métodos que usamos para las imágenes satelitales,// los técnicos pueden ahora procesar las obtenidas por RM para distinguir más fácilmente del tejido circundante coágulos, tumores, etc. Nuestros programas electrónicos analizan la*

información obtenida mediante RM, agudizando el contraste entre diferentes tejidos y eliminando los detalles superfluos. Se logran así imágenes en que diversos rasgos aparecen en color distinto, lo cual permite un diagnóstico de muchos desórdenes más rápido y precoz que nunca."

("One last instance is our digital magnetic resonance (MR) image processing. This is a novel technique allowing us to view the inner parts of the body. Unlike X-rays, MR is
sensitive to soft tissues, such as the brain's. With the same software and methods we use for satellite imagery, technicians can now process MR images to distinguish more readily clots, tumors, etc. from the surrounding tissue. Our computer programmes analyse information obtained through MR, sharpening contrasts between different tissues and eliminating superfluous detail. Thus images are achieved in which various features are shown in different colour, which enables a quicker and earlier than ever diagnosis of many disorders." [195 syllables])

We shall next examine the information that has been 'lost': 1) '*biomedical spin-off example involves the use of*' (the kind of phrase one should always be merciful enough to do away with); 2) '*NASA-developed*' (NASA is systematically replaced by the first person plural, which allows for much savings, since the word is used *ad nauseam* throughout the text; besides, as I have pointed out, everything mentioned in this presentation has been 'NASA-developed'); 3) '*human* body' (obviously not any other animal's); 4) 'digital image-processing *technology*' (the context makes this noun redundant, especially in Spanish); 5) 'X-rays, *which are sensitive to bone*' (first, not to 'bone' but to 'bone tissue'; second, the audience can be safely assumed to know that much; third, the difference becomes clear in the next phrase anyway); 6) '*computer software and image processing methods*' (it is already or it will become clear enough); 7) '*medical* technicians' (which other ones?); 8) 'can now *process MR images*' (obvious redundancy); 9) '*such anomalies as blood* clots' (tumors and clots are obviously anomalous, and the *etc.* covers the 'such ... as'); 10) 'surrounding *healthy* tissue' (the nature of the surrounding tissue is immaterial, the

anomalies must simply be distinguished); 11) 'analyze *digital* information obtained' (it is already specified at the beginning), 12) '*body scans*' (I did not know exactly what the expression meant --though I had a very good idea-- nor did I have the foggiest notion about how to render it in Spanish; it is evident, nevertheless, that it adds nothing at all to the point. Now that I have found out --'*sondeos*'-- I would still omit it); 13) '*tissue maps*' (besides the difficulty of producing a smooth Spanish equivalent other than simply '*mapas*,' the expression is absolutely unnecessary); and 14) '*internal physiological* disorders' (the text has spoken of nothing but).

This translation is much clearer than the original. But let us count some syllables: the original amounts to some 285, the 'abstract' version, to 265; a meager 5% less (but more than 35% above 'its' English counterpart; thanks God for redundancy!). Imagine how long would the 'full' translation have turned out to be. Supposing I'd had the ability to come up with it **and** say it, would it have been intelligible? Would it not have been at times very clumsy? Would I have had the extra time and energy to exhume from my unconscious the terms for 'clot' and 'early,' and to realise that 'confusing' meant 'interfering' and think of '*superfluo*,' the three of which so much contribute to overall tone and clarity? Not I, believe me; not in a million years!

Needless to emphasise, this skills must be taught and practiced. There is simply no way a beginner will think of them on his own, much less dare try and use them. The essential thing to hammer down is that the interpreter should be listening for ideas; as if the text were addressed to him, and not as a linguistic artifact, but as a message with a specific sense to be grasped and only then relayed. This way, the interpreter is taking maximum advantage of his effort: he will discard non-relevant linguistic information, first and foremost simple redundancies; next he will extract the basic sense; he will then try and articulate it as briefly and clearly as possible without marring the style of the original (and, more often than not, vastly improving upon it); and, finally, he will deliver his shorter version with poise and clarity, making full use of intonation and pauses to make up for whatever secondary information has been relinquished. As an important bonus, he will have acquired sufficient leeway to be more explicit than the speaker when necessary.

Before I wind up, a last and --I should hope-- self-evident *caveat*: I am not asserting that the interpreter must always abstract or compress no matter what. But I am indeed stressing that whenever the situation allows for or demands it, he must be able to do so, and do it right. The ability to abstract ought to be among his most basic and cherished qualifications. An interpreter who cannot abstract is very much like a soldier who, once out of ammunition, doesn't know any better than surrender. Many of the best interpreters have realised this and systematically use the method; others apply it without being quite aware. But all of us have had to learn it our own hard way. Don't we owe it to our aspiring colleagues to let them in on it?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BROWN, G. and YULE, G.: (1983) *Discourse Analysis*, Cambridge University Press, Avon, 288 pp.

CHERNOV, G. V.: (1987) *Osnovy sinkhronnovo perevoda*, Vysshaja Shkola, Moscow, 256 pp.

FODOR, J. A.: (1975) *The Language of Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma., 214 pp.

GILE, D.: (1985) "Le modele d'éfforts et l'équilibre d'interprétation en interprétation simultanée", *Meta* XXX-1, pp. 30-36.

--(1988) "Le partage de l'attention et le 'modèle d'effort' en interprétation simultanée", *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 1.

--(1990) *Basic Concepts and Models for Conference Interpreting Training* (First Version), INALCO & CEEI (ISIT), Paris, 92 pp.

KATZ, J. J.: (1988) *Propositional Structure and Illocutionary Force*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma., 247 pp.

MACKINTOSH, J.: (1985) "The Kintsch and Van Dijk Model of Discourse Comprehension and Production Applied to the Interpretation Process", *Meta* XXX-1.

SEARLE, J. R.: (1987a) *Speech Acts, An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma., 203 pp.

--(1987b) *Expression and Meaning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma., 187 pp.

SELESKOVITCH, D.: (1989) "Teaching Conference Interpreting", *ATA Series*, vol. III, SUNY, N.Y., pp. 65-88.

SELESKOVITCH, D. and LEDERER, M.: (1981) *La traduction simultanée, Experience et théorie*, Minard, Paris, 454 pp.

--(1984) *Interpréter pour traduire*, Didier Erudition, Paris, 311 pp.

--(1989) *Pédagogie raisonée de l'interprétation*, Paris, Didier Érudition, 281 pp.

VAN DIJK, T. A.: (1980) *Estructuras y funciones del discurso*, Siglo XXI, México, 1980.

--(1988) *La ciencia del texto, un enfoque interdisciplinario*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1973.