

DROPPING THE PEN AND GRABBING THE MIKE. A U.N. TRANSLATOR TRAINS TO BECOME AN INTERPRETER.

By

Susana Malchik

United Nations Translator - New York

This is an account of a few training sessions when I practised to become an interpreter. Unfortunately, my training was not very methodical and was interrupted by several factors that took up some of my time, one of them, and not the least important, that I got married. I started off in New York, in February, with tapes I borrowed from the training service at the UN, who has them classified according to difficulty. I was given 'easy' tapes, i.e. general in content and slow. The bulk of my training, though, was carried out during the month of July in Geneva, where my husband was sent on mission by the United Nations, and I had no specific occupation during the day. By that time I had returned the old tapes and all I managed to get hold of were recordings of sessions of the UN Commission for the Peaceful Use of Outer Space. It sounds overwhelming, but it is not that bad. The vocabulary may be tricky, but it ends up being okay once you get used to it. Also, since I am a UN translator who had had to translate documents on the subject, they are not all that foreign to me, although written work can be very different from speeches that are intended to be read aloud. The tapes contained many interventions, which differed enormously in difficulty: some delegates spoke with a heavy accent, some read hastily and with little intonation, some hesitated, paused, repeated themselves, some referred to technical matters in a simplified way, others limited themselves to enumerating their countries' achievements in the area of space activities. In short, I had no way of knowing in advance what kind of material I was going to get, so my practice was done at random, which sometimes contributed to my frustration. On the other hand, the very fact that all the

recordings were from one commission helped me in the sense that most delegates talked about the same subjects and although some of their statements were extremely technical, I got more and more familiar with them as I went along.

That I have been training to become an interpreter will probably not surprise anybody; that I wrote a diary about it might. To be honest, I was the first one to have no faith in it whatsoever. When my husband and I talked about it in the beginning, the idea got me awfully nervous; I thought I'd look ridiculous telling everybody who would lend an ear how much I struggled through various accents and how frustrated I felt about not understanding or getting the idea too late to express it. Of course, my husband worked at convincing me with his usual persistence, and said that even if it was worth nothing, nobody had ever done it before to his knowledge, so at least it would be a novelty, and it might just help trainers understand their students a little better and provide some useful feedback for their work.

February 15. I'm doing statements from the fortieth anniversary sessions of the United Nations and obviously they are relatively simple and deal with subjects like peace and security, world problems, the arms race, etc. in a general way. I am extremely tempted to follow the speaker very closely, and sometimes it works; the problem is that when I stumble upon something I don't understand or is not easy to translate I get completely lost so I have to go back to waiting till I get the message before interpreting. When I am farther away from the speaker and try to grasp the general idea, I end up using better Spanish and possibly expressing myself more clearly, but invariably I find I have

to skip the next phrase because I could not hear its beginning.

February 16 Today I did a tape in French which was short and slow, so I played it a few times. The third and fourth times I would cheat since I could remember the words and I would even start interpreting before the delegate said anything. Also, I think I concentrate too much on the words and don't compress all I could. I end up rushing on my sentences and saying 'enternacional' instead of 'international', because I devote so much more attention to listening than to saying. French is more difficult for me than English because I don't understand it so well. There are words that I still don't get, even after listening to the tape five times. But it doesn't happen that often, so it's not an obstacle for understanding sense. When it does happen, I supply a word I consider suitable. That is also the case when I don't understand a word not because I cannot decipher it but because I'm speaking and I can't manage to hear it. For instance, today my speaker said: "...des problèmes qui préoccupaient l'opinion internationale" I didn't hear the word "opinion" so I said "comunidad" instead, which turned out to be appropriate enough. In any case, for me it's much easier in English, even if I don't hear the beginning of a phrase, I can more or less follow the speaker's train of thought and say something that makes sense with half of the information. Maybe in English I'm more used to the clichés that come up in UN documents all the time, so I can anticipate them better.

February 21. Extreme frustration and horrible doubts! Will I ever get to be an interpreter? Today I practised with a speech by a Moroccan delegate in which the man speaks relatively fast, hesitates a lot and refers to a specific question, Western Sahara, that I am not familiar with at all. I start to interpret but I cannot go farther than 'Señor Presidente'. I decide to shut up and listen. I still don't understand. Later that day I speak to a fellow translator who says I should not get discouraged and suggests that I do shadowing. He does not know the word but that's what he means. In his view whoever can do shadowing can get to be an interpreter and whoever has not that kind of retentive memory cannot. He told me about a very good secretary he once had, who would take dictation of his translations. When he finished dictating his sentences, he remembered, she would still continue to type for a few more

seconds, that is, she retained a good chunk of it in her memory. The analogy with interpretation, he suggested, was that she also had to listen to one thing while, in her case, typing another. After that, I decided to do shadowing with this horrible tape. I stopped mid-way and started listening. Only then did I begin to realize what the speaker was saying - not what his words meant, but his Government's position and a bit of the history of the problem. Even though I thought I had not advanced much in my training, I was happy to have learned something about the question of Western Sahara.

February 23. Today I tried my luck again with the Moroccan speaker. Of course there are lots of things that I still don't understand or that I cannot translate properly, but at least I could say a few coherent phrases. In this tape I cannot but use the method my husband advocates (listening, understanding and compressing) because the sentences are rather complicated and the pronunciation distracts me enough so that if I didn't say it in my own words and understanding the sense of the phrase would be lost.

February 24. Still with that blessed tape from Morocco, but I think I'm making some kind of progress. Surely, in real life I will never have the chance to listen to my speaker a few times before interpreting him, but this is practice, remember? Practice. I have to remind myself all the time, and even so I still get frustrated sometimes in the middle of a tape and give up. Later I start again and finish it.

February 25. Yes!!! Today I interpreted the Moroccan speech from start to finish. Of course I only said the very essential, making an effort to compress, use constructions different from the speaker's and understand the sense before opening my mouth. I got lost only once, but the rest of the time I spoke and spoke like crazy and suddenly... the statement was over. All right!

March 5. I cannot compress, I cannot compress, I cannot compress!! Today I practised with a speech from Surinam which was relatively easy, and the man spoke slowly and with some difficulty, but I always tend to speak virtually on his toes. I got lost just a few times because the ideas were simple, but my phrases sounded a little twisted. For example, he said: "The principles embodied in the Charter (and I was already saying "Los principios consagrados en la Carta") are constantly violated", which forced me to finish with a not very successful passive

voice in Spanish. Or, he would say, "The fight of the peoples in Central America for social equality, economic freedom and, above all, human dignity are often neglected and sometimes bloodily suppressed." I don't even want to think of what came out of that. Up to "human dignity" everything was all right, but then I had to use the very-useful-though-not-very-elegant "*se ve ignorada*," in order to save that passive voice, and in the case of "bloodily suppressed" I had to think of a whole new sentence: "*y a veces son reprimidos con sangre*". In this sense I felt quite frustrated because if I didn't say it 'the English way' and took a little time to think of a good solution, I missed whatever followed. There are very few instances where I could compress; those when I could easily realize what were the words that could be omitted, for example: "On the occasion of the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the United Nations" was left as "*En este aniversario*" (On this anniversary), but the opportunities to do that were scarce, I found. Another example could be an expression that is very often used at the UN: "to achieve a peaceful solution to this problem," in Spanish "*para solucionar este problema pacíficamente*" (to solve this problem peacefully).

March 6. Today I practised with a tape from Guyana. The man has a certain accent and hesitates a lot, although he speaks slowly. He also has a style that tries to be refined and ends up being clumsily affected, but difficult to interpret using the same structures. I never have enough time to say it well. So I speak fast and make mistakes. The speaker said: "... the determination of the peoples of the United Nations to pursue universalistic objectives...", and I interpreted: "*la determinación de los pueblos de las Naciones Unidas de lograr objetivos universales...*", which was okay until I heard the rest: "and agree on broad strategies necessary to achieve them", that I put as: "*y convenir en trazar las estrategias amplias necesarias para lograrlos.*" My husband listens to my tape, I call his attention to this repetition and he laughs. "I wish all interpreters would worry about this kind of thing," he says.

March 9. Today I practised with a tape from Norway and could translate the whole of it. The man spoke clearly and slowly, so I could say everything, almost with no need to compress. Obviously, I followed his structures in virtually all cases, but I didn't think it was too clumsy.

When I told my husband, happy as I was, he said the most important thing was not saying it all but compressing: saying it all was the easy part, what was hard was to summarize; saying it all was what came naturally, and a 'second order operation of the brain' was not necessary, while in order to compress you must understand. In short, he said that I had not achieved much, that what I thought a milestone was just an illusion. Then I listened to the same tape again and tried to compress. Obviously the fact that I already knew the text worked to my advantage, but I sought to compress all I could, with words other than those in the original, if possible. For example, the speaker said: "...we will have to display a high degree of realism, show respect and understanding for different points of view and act in a spirit of compromise and cooperation," which I interpreted: "*... tendremos que ser realistas, respetar los distintos puntos de vista, en un espíritu de transacción*" (We will have to be realistic, respect the different points of view, in a spirit of compromise). Another example: "...no country can claim that its solution is the only valid one," which I translated as: "*ningún país puede decir que tiene la verdad*" (no country can claim it holds the truth), which I thought was pretty good.

March 12. Today I compressed a lot and I think it came out quite nicely. I missed some sentences because I would wait to have a whole idea in my head before I said anything. So no phrase was left hanging, as happens sometimes when I understand the beginning of it but not the end. Once I did not get the first part of a conditional sentence (I didn't hear the "if"), so when I got to the second part I could not continue. I guess if I had heard the whole sentence before I started to interpret I would have realized that it was conditional and I would have done it correctly. Another thing that I did not do, thanks to the fact that I compressed, was translate too literally. Since what I was doing was saying it again with my own words, shorter and simpler, I came up with short and simple structures, in good Spanish, with no passive voices or strange expressions.

July 5. Today I started my training in earnest. I'm still not very convinced that I've got what it takes to be an interpreter, but my husband is so keen on me practising that I thought I might give it a try. (He normally has more faith in me than I do).

I had been practising on and off in New York, sometimes with my Walkman on my way to work, sometimes in the office, where I would record myself, and sometimes at home. On the whole I felt very frustrated and discouraged. I was never systematic, but on occasions I would listen to a tape a few times and the fifth or sixth I could get to understand it completely and interpret it passably, with many omissions, of course.

But this was a few months ago and I haven't touched the tapes until today, when the results have been more discouraging than ever. As my husband puts it, I haven't made any progress in these months of *not* practising. The usual happened: I could not understand completely, or when I did it was too late to say anything; I would wait too long and then forget or wait too little and not be able to get the second part because I was talking then, in which case I would invent something so as not to leave the phrase unfinished, and it would not always fit. In general the vocabulary was not such a big problem...but the abbreviations! One I could not make out from the context was NPS, so one romantic evening out with my husband I asked him, out of the blue, and he answered: "Nuclear power sources," poor innocent victim. When he learned why I had asked he regretted having told me because, he said, he had 'robbed' me of a way of practising how to guess the meaning of a word one does not understand.

July 6. Compressing, compressing. I try, but most of the times it sounds ridiculous. I try to summarize and the result is I say an extra-short sentence and it sounds so poor that I find myself forced to round it up somehow, and since I have used different words from the ones the speaker uses in order to compress, now I have to find words of my own to complete the thought. Also, in order to understand and then summarize, I have to listen to the whole phrase, then I say a short sentence and when I finish he has started speaking about something else altogether, so I listen and then blurt out another short phrase. The result is an unrelated bunch of short phrases unconvincingly uttered. When I don't compress and feel I can say it all, I say it all but unintelligibly.

July 9, am. Practice seems more pointless than ever. I can hardly understand anything I'm hearing. The vocabulary is awful and whatever I understand it comes too late for me to say anything. Whatever sentences I can make out and

utter sound so ridiculous I might as well not say anything at all. When I used to practise with speeches on general issues I could see a light at the end of the tunnel; now I feel more and more discouraged every day. I cannot even practise for more than 20 minutes, I feel like crying after that and I end up throwing it all away and swearing not to try ever again. I don't know why I bother.

July 9, pm. In the height of my frustration, I tell my husband how alone and disoriented I feel, and that it seems I'm running in all different directions without a method or a focus of any kind. He tells me he will only bring the training into our marriage on the condition that I take him seriously and forget he is my husband while we are doing it. He has no trouble separating; it's me who have to swallow my pride and listen to him. So he puts the tape on the recorder while I'm doing something else and when I timidly come for the reviews (which I fear terribly) he tells me it's excellent, that I shouldn't ask so much of myself at this stage and even though the sentences don't seem to be connected (see July 6), each one is coherent and correct in Spanish.

That is one thing he taught me right from the start and I never forgot it. Whenever I start a phrase I finish it, even if my end of the phrase is not exactly the same as the original, and normally I'm a great distance apart from the speaker to use his words so I have to use my own, so the phrase comes out in correct Spanish. The danger of doing that is that sometimes you go too far and end up guessing something that wasn't there. For example, my speaker said: "We are happy to inform that the Center for Remote Sensing will become operational in October 1991." and I interpreted: "*En octubre de 1991 empezará a funcionar el centro operacional de...*" Then I paused because I knew it was not "operacional", so that made me forget about the rest. But that "de" forced me to say something else..., what to say? "...de la India.", I finished, since my speaker was reviewing the space applications in that country. It was not brilliant, but it's not a glaring mistake, and if a bored delegate had been listening to me, he would probably not have noticed it.

July 10. Practice with a speech I have done once. The delegate is from Austria and pauses frequently (God bless him!), referring mainly to general things, congratulating people, reviewing the achievements of the different committees and

working groups and extending invitations left and right. That gives me courage to carry on to the speech by the representative of Intelsat, an American who rushes through innumerable names of projects, instruments, services, and systems (all with their respective acronyms). Well, I don't get to say half of his speech, but at least I don't crumble. One thing that happens often, maybe because I am a translator, is that my mind goes blank on a word (which later I realize I could very well have omitted) and that makes me waste a lot of time and probably forget the rest of the phrase, so I have to try and finish it suitably on my own. Another waste of time is trying to find the *right* translation for whatever word or phrase, and until I find it I forget what the sense of the whole sentence was.

July 11. Not bad, not bad at all! Today I spoke more than ever. I don't know whether that is good or not, but I felt I did a good job. My speaker was from Hungary and spoke s-l-o-w-l-y and even though he had an accent, I could understand each word almost instantly and guess what he had to say before he finished saying it. I did compress a bit but mainly translated. Obviously he spoke about general things like global cooperation and international activities, but still. Since understanding didn't pose so much of a problem, I tried to be aware of how my sentences connected with each other and made an effort not to repeat the subject, if two sentences had the same, and said "for this purpose" or "this use", or words to that effect instead of repeating time and again "use of outer space for peaceful purposes".

July 12. Today my husband and I sat together to listen to the recording of my interpretation. I found out that it helps a lot more than I thought. That is, training should not just be practising like a machine to develop the reflex (although it is the essential part, I think) but also listening to yourself and maybe listening to the speech you just tried to interpret to see whether there are things that you understood wrongly or that you just didn't hear. Also, listening to yourself gives you an idea of how you sound on tape, what your problems are regarding intonation, hesitating, etc. Today my husband told me another thing that I realized made a difference. That I have to take a little distance from the words and think about the whole situation of the speech, i.e. who the speaker is, on whose behalf he is speaking, when, after

whom, etc. For example, in the proceedings, India, Austria, Canada and other countries talk about their different programmes but all touch upon the subject of disarmament, and how it affects space activities. Then comes the United States, on a "point of order". "Why are we talking about disarmament in the Commission of Outer Space?", says the delegate, alleging that it belongs in the Disarmament Commission, and going on to explain when the Commission of Outer Space was created, and what its mandate was. Why? Well, because the United States has a very powerful space arms programme (Star Wars) and is not interested in discussing it in the light of disarmament questions. That I only realized when we talked about it with my husband, but I remember when I practised with it for the first time I thought it was a weird intervention. I guess it would have been enormously easier to interpret had I seen it in this light then.

July 23. Had to interrupt training again. In the middle of my week off, though, I practised twice, with more or less satisfactory results, but always with the same tape, since it was the only one I had with me. Today I tried with a new speech that I had never heard before, and I could feel the lack of practice. I got lost a couple of times and understood much less. My husband listened to it afterwards and gave me a few pointers; for example, if the speaker enumerates, and announces the number of elements in the enumeration, never repeat it. Yesterday the delegate talked about the practical use of space applications in two instances: the earthquake in Armenia and... I never knew what the other one was, but I had said the words 'two instances', so I created expectation and the sentence sounded ostensibly incomplete. I could have mentioned the use of the applications in *many* instances, the earthquake in Armenia, for example. And, then, if I had understood it, the other element.

July 25. Frustration is such an enemy that it's becoming an handicap. I don't know whether it is me or whether this happens to all trainees, but many times I have to fight with my impulse to throw it all away and forget about it. I wonder if it is a question of professional pride or competition; my husband conjectures that I feel I'm taking a test everyday, and everyday I'm failing it, that is why I end up so discouraged. Today I practised, well I should say I listened to a speech by the delegate of Pakistan. It was hell.

The accent was undecipherable, the vocabulary impossible and the speed unattainable. I felt I could never do it. I remembered that in these cases students are supposed to 'shut up and listen', so I did. I still felt bad. I concentrated on listening without worrying about interpreting, but it felt frustrating anyhow. I could not refrain from thinking of a way of translating this phrase or that one, which made it harder for me to understand the words and, above all, the *sense* of the speech. Then what I did was listen to one sentence at a time and, from the few words I had understood, extract the probable meaning and build a sentence around it, even if it was far shorter and much more general and non-committal than the original. Obviously the result was a very brief speech that contained almost no details, although it carried the general idea.

August 1. Today I practised with a recording of an exchange between several delegates, who were discussing, in response to the remarks made by the representative of the United States (see July 12), whether the question of disarmament belonged in the Committee for the Peaceful Use of Outer Space or in the Disarmament Commission or in both. Consequently, statements were short and unplanned, there were hesitations and corrections, but I knew that they were talking about that and I knew they were going to refer to what the United States had said and maybe to what the previous speaker had said, agreeing with him or not, and finally giving an idea of their own that would support or criticize the matter in question. The exchange of views was easy to grasp and the dialogue was clear so it was much simpler to interpret.

As I said in the introduction, this is a record of a few sessions and obviously cannot reflect a full process of training. Nevertheless, I will continue training between the deadline for this paper and the time of its presentation, when I will probably have a better understanding of the progress made.

On the whole, there are three elements that I think are worth mentioning, looking back in time and remembering. First, a word I have used repeatedly throughout my lines: 'frustration'. It may be a question of temperament, but I bet it has happened, in varying degrees, to every student. I guess a lot depends on your teacher, what kind of encouragement you get, and what kind of tools he or she uses to keep you going.

Undoubtedly in my case frustration was a very powerful enemy and the temptation to give it all up became immense. It took a lot of reassurance from my husband and a lot of determination on my part to keep practising.

This brings us to the second element that I consider important: invariably, the result of the interpretation turned out to be much better than I had suspected. Obviously I cannot say I was surprised or that I heard in my tapes something I didn't know was there, but in general, when I listened to myself I found out it did not sound so shaky as I thought, it was more intelligible, the phrases, unconnected as they might have been, sounded convincing enough and made the right sense. In short, after reviewing my own interpretation and the way I had solved some of the problems I was confronted with, I would get back part of the confidence I had lost while actually recording, which would give me strength for the next attempt.

The third element that in my opinion should be taken into account is the advantage you have when you know something about the situation, i.e. when you are familiar with the subject and the speakers in a way that allows you to read between their lines and comprehend right from the start the *message* in their statements, either when it's hidden behind euphemistic expressions or seemingly irrelevant words or, more importantly, at this stage of my training, when their command of the language does not enable them to convey the sense they want to make or their speed impedes understanding. In sum, when the words as such are no help and maybe even an obstacle, knowledge of the world becomes essential. In this connection, I also found that it is extremely useful when you can organize the speaker's statement and reduce it to 'macropropositions', i.e. sentences that summarize, for example, each paragraph - titles, as it were. Actually once you have that, you can work in reverse order: start by saying only macropropositions and then go on to add more information each time, keeping the structure of the speech intact, but always having clearly in your mind what the main intention of the speaker is. That is why I don't think shadowing is a good exercise (see February 21), since it distracted me from understanding.

To sum up, even if my training has not had too much of an order and the materials were haphazardly chosen, I feel much closer to my goal

and have more faith in the method I'm following. I've learned that it can be done, and it can be done well, but that the only way is saying what you understand, or not saying anything at all.