

In an earlier chapter we said that an interpreter is not a walking dictionary inasmuch as he cannot reel off the dozens of terms which might correspond to the English word "background" but that, depending on the context, he devises equivalents which most appropriately express the speaker's intent. This is how, in attempting to express as freely as possible what has become his own idea, he sometimes comes up with brilliant finds which would seem to be the result of studied preparation; yet it is simply his concern to make himself understood which gives his interpretation such an idiomatic flavor and enables him to convey the impact of the original statement. So, although the "foreign" listener does not hear the same words as the listener who hears the speech firsthand, he still hears the same thing.

Here is a relatively long excerpt taken from the consecutive interpretation of a speech. Talking about the war in Viet Nam an American speaker said, "The old emotional commitment has long since drowned in the hopeless swamps of the Delta. The China Lobby is ageing and enfeebled. The demand for a complete withdrawal becomes daily more vocal inside Congress and even within the Administration. The Americans would gladly pull out tomorrow if they could honestly persuade themselves that this would be the end of the story."

Here is the interpretation as it was recorded on tape: "L'ardeur qui les animait au début s'est enlisée depuis longtemps dans les marécages fétides du delta. Le lobby chinois est vieux et usé, son influence s'affaiblit de jour en jour. Des voix se font entendre de plus en plus fortes, au Congrès,

parfois meme au sein du gouvernement: "Que les Américains retirent leurs troupes!" Les Américains plieraient certainement volontiers bagages s'ils avaient la conviction que leur départ n'entraînerait pas de conséquences catastrophiques."

Although I have had twenty-five years of experience in the profession and although the purpose of this book is to show what interpretation is, I hesitated before including this example which is so typical of consecutive interpretation. Looking it over on paper I can imagine the traditional objections like "That's not what he said": "old emotional commitment" is not "une ardeur qui animait," "hopeless" is not "fétide," "tomorrow" is not "certainement." But let us examine this text more closely. In order to reproduce the words of the consecutive interpretation on paper I have had to record them and in so doing I have changed the nature of my example. By putting the spoken word down on paper I have robbed it of its evanescent character and laid it open to scrutiny. In reading a text it is possible to ponder a word without the meaning of the rest of the sentence or idea getting irretrievably lost. In listening to a speech, however, one has to decide whether to concentrate on what is being said or to focus on one particular word at the risk of missing what follows. If we look at the way in which we listen to any speech in our own language, we would find that we do not listen to the syntax of it -- no one upon hearing this speech would have noticed that a swamp can hardly be "hopeless." What is more, the speaker probably did not choose these terms intentionally and was probably unaware that he had used them. Did the meaning of the word "hopeless" have special importance in and of itself or was it simply used to emphasize the overall tone of the statement by conjuring up a lot more than was explicitly referred to? The interpreter does not have time to ask himself these questions and yet he answers them when he automatically pairs "marécages" with an adjective which sounds correct in French. I would contend the word "fétide" in this example conjures up similar

allusions to those of "hopeless" and that the overall tone of the sentence is successfully conveyed to French listeners by the use of a word pair which sounds familiar to them. While I do not claim that "fétide" is the translation of "hopeless," I do maintain that this interpretation, carried out in 30 seconds, conveyed the same message to the French-speaking listeners as the English-speaking listeners received in all its detail, with the same shades of meaning and in a comparable style. I would also maintain that the message was immediately comprehensible to the French-speaking listeners and, even though they were unable to remember the exact words used in French or English, both groups of listeners understood the same message in its entirety.

Perhaps a translator could come up with a better rendition of this passage if it were given to him as a written text. It might be written differently in French, but it would also be possible to restate the message differently in English.

The reason why I constantly emphasize that acts of speech are fleeting and that a passage of the length of the above excerpt has to be interpreted in a few seconds is not to make excuses for what might become a better translation if more time were taken over it, but to emphasize one of the steps in the rather astonishing process by which a message is rendered in another language at the speed of the spoken word.