most examples of this kind would not cause the interpreter any major difficulty. If the speaker really does have an inadequate command of the working languages of the conference, the interpreter can always request the documents from which the speaker will read and reconstruct the meaning from them. (It is most unlikely that someone who does not speak a language well will speak without a text.) But the interpreter is no wizard; if the speech is totally incomprehensible, he has no recourse but to switch off his microphone. His listeners will be no worse off than those hearing the speaker first hand. Neither will have understood the speech.

## 5. WRITTEN TEXTS

In the practice of the profession there are other obstacles which impede interpretation in the true sense of the word.

In conferences where delegates present their latest findings in a certain field and participate in the main to have the results of their research published, there is usually no dialogue but a series of monologues. The task that the interpreter is required to perform at such conferences is more akin to written translation than to interpretation. Under such circumstances there is a drop in the quality of interpretation and we shall see why.

a. The speaker who reads out his speech has spent days, if not weeks, drafting his paper. The expressions which he has set to paper are the result of a succession of mental processes which began with an intuitive intent and resulted in the final version read at the meeting. He has reread, corrected and revised his paper -- yet he will take only about twenty minutes to deliver it orally. Papers presented at such congresses are not designed to elicit an immediate reaction from the listeners. They are also impervious to the context in which they are presented. Their authors are neither playwrights seeking a



dramatic effect nor actors attempting to make a text come to life. b- They read their papers in a monotone, devoid of the rhythm and intonation which are part and parcel of the constant feedback between ideas and their formulation. c- During their delivery there are none of the pauses, changes of pace or repetitions which normally help to convey meaning and which give the spoken language its immediate intelligibility. Because the text is on paper, the speaker has no need to think about the content of his statement and, being spared the effort of formulating his thoughts, he does not slow down his delivery. A speech which is read out is delivered at a much more rapid pace than a statement made off the cuff (approximately 200 words per minute as opposed to 150 words per minute in extemporaneous speech); d- moreover, the density of information presented in a written text is generally greater.

Lacking spontaneity, the oral presentation of a written document is just as devoid of meaning as a play read by a non-actor in a monotone. When, at international conferences, speakers go up to the podium, one after the other, to deliver 15-minute papers which have no obvious relationship to each other, it becomes impossible even for experts to grasp the full meaning of the information presented. Experience shows that a written paper will not be discussed unless it has been submitted prior to the meeting and the listeners have been given a chance to digest the material before hearing it delivered.

Returning to the subject of the spoken language, it can be argued of course that not all those who speak off the cuff are great orators in the classic sense of the term. Even a poor speaker, however, is easier to understand than one who simply reads a paper. Speaking spontaneously actually requires performing three mental operations at the same time: thinking about the thoughts to be conveyed, expressing each idea aloud, and organizing and shaping the following thought on the basis of what has just been said. We have seen that this process

produces about 9,000 words an hour.[1] However rapid this pace may seem, it represents the speed of mental processes connected with speaking and it is therefore suited to the understanding capabilities of listeners of comparable intelligence and background. An interpreter listening to a speaker speaking off the cuff is therefore in a good position to understand, since he can turn words into ideas at the same speed as the speaker turns ideas into words; he is thus able to keep up with the speaker's delivery. In terms of a written text, the spoken language is more like a rough draft. By definition, a written text is intended to be read, and can be read over and over again, whereas the spoken word is meant to be heard once and once only.

A hybrid form of the two (the written text read aloud or recited from memory) means that the paper being presented has only a minimal chance of being fully understood when delivered and even less of a chance of being properly interpreted. A comparison could be drawn between the time it takes to do a written translation, which is roughly equivalent to the time needed to write the original text, and the time it takes to interpret a speech, which is equivalent to the time needed to deliver it off the cuff. The United Nations has laid down six to eight pages of translation as the average amount of work that can be expected from its translators per day. This figure would seem to substantiate the hypothesis we have made concerning the relationship between the amount of time needed for drafting and that needed for translating.

Interpreters are often called on to do "on sight" translations, i.e. to give an on-the-spot oral rendering of a written text as it is being read out at meetings. This amounts to asking them to convey

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1) We have chosen the number of words translated per hour simply as a convenient yardstick. Elsewhere, however, we have emphasized the unimportance of the individual word in interpretation.



messages which, because of their form and the way in which they are presented, are not amenable to interpretation at all and this at a speed of 200 words per minute, or 40 times faster than normal translating work. This absurd pace quickly reduces the interpreter to a state of mental and physical exhaustion, and his usefulness to the listener is practically nil, when compared to the service he is able to render when dealing with free speech. Placed in an impossible situation, he gives up trying to understand: he leaves his sentences unfinished, becomes breathless and frustrated, soothes his troubled conscience when he sees that his colleagues are managing no better than he, is happy to translate a word or two correctly here and there, curses the day he accepted that particular conference, leaves the booth as soon as the meeting is over and vanishes gratefully into the anonymity of the crowd. The best interpreters, however, those who have proved themselves worthy of the name, refuse to jeopardize their profession's reputation by working under these impossible conditions. They simply switch off their microphones.

The only possible solution to this serious problem is to give the interpreter the opportunity of thoroughly reviewing the documents which are to be delivered at a conference. He should be given a few days before the start of a conference to study and annotate the papers which he will be required to translate orally. In addition, a sufficient number of interpreters would have to be hired to staff the conference so that each one would have enough time, while his colleagues were at work in the booth, to go over the papers which come in at the last minute. This would mean that interpreters would be hired for a longer period of time, the number of days of paid preparation being equal to the number of working days of the conference; it would also mean doubling or tripling the size of the interpretation teams.