

## Chapter 2

### **Preparation/Anticipating the Speaker**

Consistently good performance in conference interpreting depends on sustained mental alertness. An interpreter must maintain attention and concentration through many hours of meetings and absorb the contents of lengthy discussions on many subjects. This means keeping fit, notably by getting enough sleep and following good habits of nutrition and exercise.

An interpreter must also adopt an attitude of intellectual modesty and willingness to learn, keeping up with changes in his or her languages as well current events and the related jargon. Interpreters must be able to understand and clearly state a wide range of possible ideas and arguments representing different sides of any issue, even arguments which may seem implausible, or with which they may strongly disagree. Gaining familiarity with the subject matter to be discussed at an upcoming assignment is important, and attending a meeting in advance will be especially helpful to get a grasp of procedural rules and terms. Careful observation of speakers' gestures and demeanor, as well as the reactions of listeners, will provide additional clues to the intent behind the words. Knowing the specific themes of a conference in advance and obtaining a copy of the agenda, background documents, list of speakers, and any prepared speeches available can also be very helpful. Many speakers prepare their speeches well in advance of delivery and will gladly give or send a copy to an interpreter who takes the trouble to ask for it. Copies of formal speeches and policy statements by public officials can often be readily obtained from their offices or looked up on their Internet web sites. Sometimes a translation of the speech to be delivered will also be made available by the speaker or his institution (known among interpreters as "a Van Doren") and can be read out by the interpreter if the translation is of good quality.

Yet, despite those elementary precautions, every speech still has its surprises. A speaker may change his or her mind at the last minute,

discard or amend prepared remarks, and say something quite unexpected. (Be especially alert to this when the speech is marked "Check Against Delivery".) And even an experienced interpreter can be caught off guard by a novel idea, an unusual turn of phrase, a breakthrough in the debate, an eccentric speaker, a spur-of-the-moment argument, an impenetrable accent, a mispronounced key word, a halting delivery, poor sound quality, an obscure reference or acronym, or a deliberately ornate way of saying a perfectly simple thing.

Overcoming problems of that kind involves a certain amount of intuition. Although an interpreter should avoid wild guesses, it is often possible, relying on the context, to "fill in the blanks" of a statement when an element of it is unclear or indistinctly heard. It can be helpful if one tries, by an effort of imagination, to anticipate what the speaker is likely to say, how he or she is likely to say it, and how it can be made comprehensible to the audience for which one is interpreting.

### **Exercises**

1 The next time you plan to hear a public figure make a speech on television or radio, write out beforehand a rough outline of your "best guess" about what the speaker is likely to say, based on what you know about the person, the circumstances of the speech, the current issues, and the occasion. Then listen to the actual speech and compare it with your notes to see how close your guesses were.

2 Formulate each of the speeches suggested below in your mind. Then deliver it aloud, to a listener, or to a mirror. If you have trouble, try writing out your speech, or speaking from notes. Time yourself. Finally, record your speech, listen to it, and consider possible improvements in your arguments, diction, and speed and rhythm of delivery.

(a) You are the spokesperson of an environmental group. You have been allowed to address a legislative panel considering a law to ban all plastic beverage containers. You have ten minutes.

(b) Make the same speech as in (a) above, but to an audience of high-school students at a symposium on environmental issues.

(c) You are the trade representative of a Central American country at an international conference to promote tourism. In as few words as possible, convince the Air Travel Committee (which is made up mostly of West Indian delegates) that the whole Caribbean region should take a common stand against rising air fares.