



HEARD, NOT SEEN

The interpreters who make the UN's work possible

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by Bill Harby in Geneva, swissinfo.ch

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Without its corps of multilingual interpreters, the United Nations' work would come to a screeching halt. People like Rebecca Edgington move a meeting of 193 nations beyond a babel of voices, and enable hostile states to communicate on neutral ground.

It's morning and Edgington, a UN staff interpreter since 2004, is in her low-lit booth high above a huge meeting room at the UN's Palais des Nations in Geneva, reading aloud so fast there's almost no space between the words.

"... concerns are raised by reports of an increase in cases of incitement to hatred and other manifestations of intolerance ..."

Except she isn't just reading. The Russian text on the page in front of her is being simultaneously spoken by the delegate from Belarus. Edgington is interpreting it aloud into English, as the delegate is skipping over parts of his prepared statement.

Such simultaneous interpretation is the primary duty of UN interpreters. In meetings like this one on the human rights record of Norway, speeches are given at breakneck speed so each delegate can get as much as possible on the record within the short allotted time.

Ideally, the interpreter sounds "as the speaker would sound if he or she were a native English speaker", says Edgington. But sometimes, "it's just trying to get the meaning out as quickly as possible".

She is one of the 101 staff interpreters based in Geneva. There are 18 working in the English booth, backed up by another 50 or so regular freelancers.

Field work

Edgington was one of the UN interpreters in Geneva and Montreux for recent Syria talks between Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and United States Secretary of State John Kerry in 2014, and previously with his predecessor Hillary Clinton in 2012.



From the English interpreters' booth above a meeting room at the UN in Geneva, Rebecca Edgington studies the list of scheduled speakers so she knows when she'll be needed next (Bill Harby)

She has also interpreted in less civilised surroundings. In 2000, as a freelancer for the Council of Europe, wearing a flak jacket and helmet, she flew into Chechnya by helicopter with a small diplomatic team. Tracer fire rose up, but they weren't hit.

"It was very tense," she says. Field missions to war zones are voluntary. Edgington, 43, has never said no, but now a wife and the mother of two young daughters, she says she "would have to think carefully" before accepting another such assignment. But if push came to shove, she admits it would be hard to say no.

UN meetings – whether at the headquarters in Geneva or New York, or on special missions around the globe – take place in any of its six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.

Edgington's boss, officer-in-charge of the interpretation service in Geneva, Alexandre Voitenkov, says UN interpreters come from many countries, but their nationality "doesn't even matter much – what is paramount are competence and adherence to United Nations ideals".

Being watched

Edgington, originally from Britain, interprets from Russian, German and French into English. UN interpreters must have at least two working languages in addition to their mother tongue.

She says that interpreting from Russian is especially interesting – and high-pressure. Russian delegates often monitor interpreters as they speak – and if the Russians don't like a word choice or idiomatic phrase, they let the interpreters know, often during the interpretation. She quotes a colleague's take on the Russians' instant critiques: "They don't go in for forensic examinations; they like their victims live."

The problem with this, says recently retired UN interpreter John Intrator, is that the monitors "can get confused" if the interpretation into English doesn't follow the word order of the original Russian. "We sometimes have to sacrifice quality to give them what they want", he says.

During the meeting on this particular morning Edgington predicts that "Ukraine is unlikely to speak Russian at the moment", and sure enough, the delegate makes his statement in English.

Emotional

As a girl in Cambridgeshire, Edgington began studying French at 11, German at 12 and Russian at 17. "I saw *perestroika* happening and Gorbachev on TV and I wanted to understand what he was saying."

Her career began in Strasbourg, France, where, as a freelancer, she worked for nine years interpreting for various European organisations, including the Council of Europe.

It was there that she experienced one of her most emotional moments as an interpreter. An Algerian journalist who had often reported stories critical of the government was testifying.



Rebecca Edgington
Interpreters prefer receiving a printed statement before it's spoken so they can familiarise themselves with any difficult words or phrases (Bill Harby)

Outside the booth

What do interpreters do when they aren't at work? Some are musicians. Rebecca Edgington plays flute. Neil Cumming plays clarinet. Recently retired John Intrator plays violin professionally. He says that interpreting is a "demanding but not always fulfilling profession", and many interpreters pursue other "more directly creative or scholarly pursuits".

Intrator knows colleagues who paint, take photographs and write, and others who pursue additional degrees in international relations, law and other subjects. And always, just for fun, there's "learning lots of obscure languages", as Cumming says. His latest purchase: "Beginner's Georgian".

“She was 27, I was 27, and she was talking about how she was reporting a story, and then she was gang-raped, and when she dragged herself home, hurt and bleeding, her family rejected her,” recalls Edgington.

“I was interpreting her with a senior male colleague, and he pushed his chair right back and I continued interpreting, and when she finished ... I looked down and I saw that the table was wet. I switched off the microphone and asked, ‘what happened?’”

Edgington’s colleague told her that, like the journalist testifying, she had been crying during most of the testimony. The young interpreter was worried that she’d acted unprofessionally, but her colleague reassured her. “You became her,” he said.

Other than conveying the emotion of the speaker, interpreters are expected to keep their personal opinions from influencing their work.

“If you’re interpreting something you don’t agree with, you really want your interpretation to be accurate so you remain neutral,” Edgington says, even though “sometimes you want to be holding up a sign saying, ‘not me, not my words!’”

Before joining the UN, she was interpreting at a meeting of young trade unionists when a man from Marseilles took the floor and “gave a rant about the fact that all the problems of the world were down to women in the workplace, and if only we could move the clock back to the 1930s when there weren’t women in the workplace, and they were at home in the kitchen ...”

Edgington says that others at the meeting who were listening to her interpret began to chuckle. When the speaker realised what was happening, he added that, of course, there should be exceptions.

Staying out of it

As chief of the “English booth” at UN Geneva, with training as part of her duties, Edgington is bringing more young women and men to her profession. Selected students who have already earned a Masters in Interpretation come to Geneva for a few days or weeks to practise in the “dummy booth” and gain experience with UN jargon and delivery.

Neil Cumming, 24, is the youngest UN staff interpreter in Geneva. Originally from Britain, he interprets from French and Russian into English. One of the most challenging requirements of his work is to remain absolutely objective. “You have your own opinion, but you’re here to do the job”, he says. “And part of the point of this place is that everyone gets to have their say”.

What else makes a good interpreter? Edgington says it is important to “have a core of confidence,” and “be a “pragmatic perfectionist”.

Voitenkov notes that coping with stress is important, “especially conferences in the field, which could last two weeks for many hours a day”. Interpreters also have to be “engaged intellectually” in world affairs, says the Russian, who began his interpreting career in Moscow and joined the UN in 1979.

Types of interpretation

As well as simultaneous interpretation, there is also “consecutive” interpretation, where, for example, at a press conference the speaker will make a short statement, then the interpreter will jump in, then back and forth.

A third kind of interpreting is “liaison” interpreting, where an interpreter sits behind a government leader, interpreting in a low voice into their ear as the other diplomat speaks.

UN interpreters always interpret into their mother tongue, apart from the Arabic and Chinese booths, which also interpret into English or French due to the lack of qualified native interpreters.

Edgington says that she and her colleagues constantly read the world press, and research relevant topics before meetings. "All the work done outside the booth" is hugely important, she says.

And outside the booth is where you have to leave your ego, because interpreting well "means being invisible," says Rebecca Edgington. "The idea is to not be a part of history."

The world's presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens and diplomats who depend upon her and her colleagues might disagree.

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max, Switzerland

26.05.2014

These people do an admirable job that requires a high degree of skills and concentration. The hardest bit is to listen while you speak because the syntax of the two languages is completely different.



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