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Interpretation: the added value of a profession

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When I was little, I shared a room with my sister and at night-time we'd whisper our secrets. One night, after we had just watched Indiana Jones' *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, I declared that I when I grew up I wanted to be an archaeologist. I could see my sister's eyes grow wide in the dark. "That's not a good idea," she said. "You'll have to swim in a pit with snakes."

As it turned out, my sister was wrong. And not only about the snakes. Studying archaeology, which I eventually did, was actually a very good idea. Digging with a trowel and a toothbrush taught me a valuable lesson: you don't just plunge blindly into things, you have to move gradually and patiently from the known to the unknown.

It is a motto which has served me in good stead. And a motto which I am today applying in my interpretation training.

It has helped me to wait instead of furiously jotting down illegible notes in consecutive exercises. It has helped me to bide my time in simultaneous practice and identify what the speaker is talking about before I plunge into the scary world of listening and talking at the same time. It is also what made me dig deep about the origins of interpreting – so I could move from the known of history to the unknown of the present.

And as always, all roads lead to the Classics. More specifically, to Cicero. Initially I was intrigued by Tiro, Cicero's slave and later freedman, who was essentially a modern day personal assistant, only better. Because his master was as prolific with speeches as Trump is with tweets, Tiro's duties included taking dictation, deciphering Cicero's handwriting and carrying out the background research to his speeches (as well as organising networking dinners and lunches and tending to Cicero's garden - do they make people like these anymore?).

Tiro is quite possibly the father of stenography. To keep up with the demands of his master, he came up with shorthand little squiggles which he scribbled down almost before the words were uttered, and then helped him to faithfully reproduce the speeches back. I

spent many an hour reading up on his technique but immediately I realised that stenography was not what I wanted. I did not want to faithfully reproduce a speech back exact word for word, I did not want to produce a verbal transcript - because what works in a language does not work in another. For example, if I want someone to open the window for me, I'd have to say "Would you mind opening the window for me please?" In Maltese I can simply say: "Iftaħli".

This is because a language is more than just words: it encapsulates the culture, the psychology and the *forma mentis* of a nation. Which is why, therefore, the interpreter's job is to faithfully relay back a concept. Notions are easily understood because they are not just words, but words which carry the baggage of the nation.

This, consequently made me go back to Cicero. In 55BC he wrote *De Oratore*, a book in the form of letters to his brother, copies of which have over the centuries found their way in many a library of aspiring and/or great orators.

This book is basically an elegant listicle. It's all there, point by point, a step-by-step guide on becoming a good speaker. As it happens, the list is insanely similar to the criteria you need to become an effective interpreter: a certain disposition towards wanting to know more, the keenness to practice diligently, and the willingness to carry a mental suitcase of global knowledge.

Cicero says that a speech won't score high unless it has a clear intention, is well-structured and parts of it can be given off from memory. Sounds very familiar. He also recommends that speakers should do some background research on their audience. Is it an audience of senators or plebeians? Or if we had to apply it today, is it a Radetzky March sort of audience or more Billy Eilish?

Last but not least, says Cicero, the speaker must give an astounding delivery using voice, gestures and facial expressions to express emotion. "Delivery," says Cicero needs to be given "the first, second and third place" in oration importance because a speech is only as effective as its delivery. Delivery displays the feelings of the soul and is understood by everyone because everyone can identify with feelings, be emotionally stirred, and consequently take home the bottom line.

It is very clear that interpreters are orators who can adequately communicate to the audience and relay the speaker's intentions. This is and will always be the value added of an interpreter: that of being a pure communicator.

An interpreter is a bridge between two people: the speaker and the listener who can only hear gibberish and strange inflections when they talk to each other. The interpreter is Harry Potter speaking Parseltongue and being able to relay back to a crowd of terrified students what the Basilisk is saying, and then everyone breathes a sigh of relief (and scampers).

It is an art which has been practiced since time immemorial. If we go back to prehistory we'd probably find a caveman who had to explain to a newcomer that in their cave "Ugga! Ugga!" meant keep the fire going and not throw all the meat in the fire and barbeque it.

Which is why we are all interpreters at heart. I'm sure that at home you are constantly giving interpretation services, albeit unpaid and unasked for. You interpret your teenager's grunts, you interpret your partner's silence. You interpret the twinkle in your friend's eyes or that ever-so-slight frown. As humans this is innate in us.

Unfortunately, it is a skill which is being stamped out. Statistics in the Western World increasingly suggest that we spend a minimum of three hours a day on our smartphones, wrapped in a bubble of our own, insulated from the real happenings and exposed only to the manicured agendas of social media companies. We no longer notice the grunt, the silence, the twinkle or the frown.

Progressively, we do not interact with real people. Instead we sit, hunched like Gollum from Lord of the Rings over our phones. Instead of admiring a ring, we admire a screen, and we think that the sounds of 'plink' 'plink' are simply precious.

I am not exaggerating. According to psychologists, we are finding cyberspace more pleasant than the real world. If a stranger 'Likes' my gormless Facebook post, then that gives me a rush of endorphins which I wouldn't get if a random-but-real stranger smiled at me and said hello when I'm walking down the street.

We have become less concerned about the community, less likely to know our neighbour, less interested in the veracity of facts. If Winston Churchill lived today I doubt people would give a second thought to his "We shall fight them on the beaches" speech.

We are only interested in our leaders when they tell us the stuff we are made to believe we want to hear. "Kick them out"; "Build a fence"; "Claim our country back" and so on. In fact, we only engage with speakers who shock us. It doesn't matter what they are saying, as long as they are entertaining us – for better or for worse.

And this is, again where the interpreter comes in. In this ever changing, ever more virtual context, how can the interpreting profession keep up?

Video conferencing! Remote Interpretation! Google Interpret! The whole shebang is being bandied about. Everyone seems to me to be trying to come up and push some clever high-techy ways of operation for the interpreting profession. It's all well and good. But sometimes, just sometimes, all we need to do is simply go back to basics. Back to our values.

The added value of interpretation is that it helps people be good communicators. The world is forgetting how to do that. Therefore, is the solution to sigh and mutter if-we-can't-beat-them-bla-bla?

To me education is always the solution. People need to be taught even more how to be good communicators. How to express ideas in Cicero's style. Logical, from the heart and for the common good. We have to recognise the fundamental problem that humanity is facing in its communication channels. The interpreting profession has to hold the flag and lead by example.

What do I mean by this? At multi-lingual plenaries, parliamentary sessions and high level meetings around the world, it should no longer be acceptable for speakers to cram a 20-minute speech into three minutes. That's fast rap *sans* the beat.

It is not communication. It is speed reading. Not unlike speed dating. Only it's Sprinter instead of Tinder. There is no joy and no soul and no connection between the speaker and the listener.

The value added of an interpreter is when they are allowed to work. Their contribution to politics – be it on a small scale in a field where the Italian wine grower is explaining the love of his grapes to a Dutch EU official, or on a larger scale at the European Council where Prime Ministers are discussing the increasing fears for freedom of speech – is effective and invaluable. It is an art which has to be upheld.

Of course, the profession has to adapt to a changing world. But the changes have to stem from the known basics of the values of communication and gradually move towards meeting unknown challenges of the future.

Which brings me back to my motto, and to my sister.

When last summer I told my sister (now not so little) that I was thinking of training as an interpreter, she hummed for a while and drummed her fingers on the table. "Hmm. That's not a good idea. It's considered to be one of the most stressful jobs in the world."

This time she was right, but by Jove (as Cicero would have said), I love it.