

An Interview with Lynn Visson, Retired United Nations Interpreter

Every interpreter has surely had excruciating nightmares about a panicky moment at the microphone, and my guest today is no different. (In one instance, she recalls waking up clutching her pillow, relieved to find that her ghastly moment was just a dream.) She has written about her experiences as a United Nations interpreter.

Lynn Visson is a New Yorker of Russian heritage who has spent a lifetime engaged with her languages as a teacher, writer, translator, and interpreter. (Her husband was also Russian.) She has a PhD in Slavic languages and literature from Harvard University. After teaching Russian language and literature at several American colleges, including Columbia University, and freelance interpreting for a while, she became a staff interpreter at the UN in 1980, working from Russian and French into English. Retired since 2005 but still freelancing, Visson is also translating, teaching interpreting, and is a consulting editor at Hippocrene Books, a New York publisher specializing in dictionaries and language text books.

You've had a long and busy career, so let's go back to the very beginning. Did you grow up speaking Russian? Was your home life influenced by Russian culture, customs, and cuisine?

I spoke Russian at home with my parents, who always spoke Russian to each other. Russian culture played a large role in my childhood; I was raised on Russian children's stories and books. My mother did not regularly cook Russian food, but when my parents and their friends entertained, the cuisine was Russian.

Have you always lived in New York?

Yes, except for six years in Cambridge, Massachusetts—four years as an undergraduate at Radcliffe and two years in graduate school at Harvard—and a year in Moscow when I was writing my dissertation.



Lynn Visson

An interpreter is like an actor—you become the person for whom you're interpreting, you're their voice.

Where and when did you learn French?

My parents spent nearly 25 years in France after they and their parents went to Paris following the revolution, so they were totally fluent. They had many French friends. In New York, my father worked in a French art gallery and my mother in cultural services at the French Embassy. They taught me French very early on and then I studied it in high school and college.

While you were a student, you volunteered as an interpreter for visiting Soviet tourists and academics. This would have been during the Cold War. Please tell us something about that experience and what you learned from it that helped propel you along on your career path?

It was my first real contact with the Soviets, since during the Cold War there were very few exchanges. It made the Soviet Union real, not just a place we read about in the newspapers. It helped me see it as a country I could connect to—the Russia my parents talked about, the Russia of their childhood.

You have taught at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey and are currently a visiting adjunct professor there. Tell us something about that environment and about the students these days. What are they looking for in a career as an interpreter?

There are students of interpreting in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Russian, French, and German. The courses include vocabulary on political issues, such as current international conflicts, disarmament, basic economics, the stock markets, inflation, and investments; social issues, such as women, youth, health (e.g., AIDS, malnutrition), and the aged; as well as parliamentary procedure needed to run a meeting, and the positions taken by major groups of countries on these issues. I teach Russian>English simultaneous interpreting. Not all students are working toward careers as interpreters. Some, for example, are planning to work for Western firms with branches in Russia.

You've said that a good interpreter knows techniques for coping with a huge variety of difficult situations, has iron nerves, doesn't panic, has a sense of style and register, finishes sentences, restructures syntax, can keep up with a rapid speaker, and has good delivery, voice quality, and intonation. This is a marvelous job description! Can you give us a few examples of the sort of difficult situations to which you refer and suggest appropriate coping techniques?

Difficult situations can arise when the interpreter has not heard or not understood the last sentence(s) of a speaker's statement. In such cases, the interpreter can sometimes wriggle out of the problem by saying, "And that is what I wish to say," as though the delegate has just summed up and concluded his statement. Another difficult situation can arise when a speaker quotes a proverb and the interpreter has absolutely no idea what it means. A coping technique in this case would be to say, "And in my country, we have a proverb that is appropriate to this occasion."

When you say that an interpreter should have a sense of style and register, what guidelines or standards are you thinking of?

When interpreting formal speeches, it's important to use the literary, formal register of the target language. This register is distinct from discussion groups, where the level of language may be quite colloquial.

You joined the UN as a staff interpreter in 1980. What do you remember about that process?

The UN Interpretation Service gave exams, as it does now. Candidates have to interpret several speeches from their working languages into their native language. In my case, I did Russian and French into English. The exams are recorded and then graded by senior interpreters.

But you weren't only interpreting in those days. You were also working in TV and radio. What were you doing there?

I interpreted for a number of Russian-American spacebridges, which were exchanges in which Russians and Americans spoke to each other on television, linked by satellite. There were a lot of these exchanges in the 1980s, including a series Phil Donahue did in Moscow with Russian audiences. I went with him to Moscow to do those.

And you've also written books?

Yes, I've written several books on interpreting and language, several books on Russian>English translation, books about the problems Russians have with English, a Russian cookbook, and a book on Russian-American marriages. I've also edited several other books, including my father's memoir of his life in Russia, France, and the New York art world.

I noticed something on your CV and just had to ask. In 1988, you consulted for Global American Television and translated Pepsi and Visa commercials into Russian to be aired on Soviet television. Please tell us about that.

These were the first American firms to advertise on Russian television. The advertisers insisted on a literal translation, but we told them that was impossible. They wanted "Visa—it's everywhere you want to be," which would have sounded

ridiculous. They compromised on "Visa—your visa to the entire world."

You interpreted for Boris Yeltsin during his visit to New York in 1989. What was it like working for him? Was he really as gregarious as he appeared in the media?

He was quite a character, very outgoing and curious about everything he was seeing. Yes, he was indeed very gregarious. I'm currently writing a book about the people for whom I've interpreted over the past 40 years, and he will certainly be in it!

Do you spend much time in Russia?

I've been there quite often, about twice a year for the past few decades, but have not been there in the past two years.

You've talked about the interpreter's experience of locking onto a speaker and feeling that speaker's entire personality vibrating inside. What was your experience, in that sense, with Yeltsin, or with Eduard Shevardnadze in 1991? Or with any of the powerful people for whom you've interpreted, especially those with whom you might have disagreed?

I certainly felt that with Yeltsin, and with Shevardnadze. "Disagreeing" with the speaker has nothing to do with that. An interpreter is like an actor—you become the person for whom you're interpreting; you're their voice. Most actors would not agree with everything their character says. Your job, as an interpreter, is to convince the audience that you're getting the speaker's message across exactly as he is conveying it.

Interpreting at the UN is also similar to acting in that there is an onstage and a backstage. In the booth, the curtain is up and the interpreter is performing. But what goes on backstage among interpreters at the UN? Can you share something about the camaraderie, the tension, and the meltdowns?

As in any organization there are friendships and cooler relationships, but basically the interpreters are a collective. You cannot work without your colleagues, and so there is a great deal of mutual support.

Speaking about English>Russian interpreting, you've said that there is no neat correspondence between Russian and

English in terms of style and register, in particular in post-perestroika Russian. What did you mean by that last thought?

In post-perestroika Russian, there has been much more of a blending of styles. Formal and informal speech, literary expressions, and slang all now seem to coexist in a kind of verbal salad. In pre-perestroika Russia, the lines were much more clearly drawn between stylistic levels, between literary and colloquial Russian.

For many people, perhaps especially those in the linguistic field, a UN interpreter is the icon of all interpreting, the most symbolic example of the craft. What is it like to work there? Please give us a day-in-the-life so that we can get some idea of what you do.

Staff interpreters work 21 hours a week: seven daily three-hour meetings, with a two-hour lunch break. The interpreter is always in a booth with a colleague and never works alone. The subjects are extremely varied: the Security Council, disarmament and arms control, speeches on sustainable development, indigenous peoples, discrimination against women, AIDS, and issues involving youth and the elderly—just an enormous range of topics.

There are six official languages at the UN: English, French, Russian, Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic. The basic idea there is that interpreting should be into the interpreter's native language, so the English booth works into English, the French booth into French, the Russian booth into Russian, and the Spanish booth into Spanish. In the English, French, Russian, and Spanish booths there are two interpreters who switch out every 30 minutes. There are three interpreters each in the Chinese booth and the Arabic booth. In the Chinese booth they work from Mandarin Chinese into English and from English into Mandarin Chinese. In the Arabic booth they work from Arabic into English or French, and from English or French into Arabic.

In the English booth one interpreter works from French and Spanish into English, and the other from French and Russian into English. In the French booth one interpreter works from English and Spanish into French and the other from English and Russian into French. The interpreters in these two booths make an arrangement at the beginning of the

meeting, so that one of the interpreters with Russian will work for 30 minutes, and then the interpreter with Spanish will take over for the next half hour. As a result, if a delegate speaks Russian, he will be interpreted either directly by the interpreter in the English booth who knows Russian, or by the interpreter in the French booth, who will listen to the Russian>English interpretation and then interpret that into French, which will be rendered into English by the English booth colleague. In the meantime, the Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic booths will also be interpreting the Russian speech by listening to the interpretation from the English and French booths. This is known as the “relay system,” when the interpreter is listening to a colleague’s interpretation rather than directly to the speaker. It’s a bit like playing “telephone,” but it works remarkably well!

While the interpreter is supposed to work for 30 minutes, in the case of a Spanish or Russian speaker, the interpreter in the English or French booth who works directly from those languages will almost always keep interpreting. This is because the policy is to interpret directly from the foreign language and avoid relay whenever possible. Of course, if a delegate goes on for an hour the interpreter may have no choice but to hand the microphone to his or her partner to avoid collapsing from fatigue!

You talked about interpreters working in small cubicles. Have those conditions changed much since the 1980s? Tell us something about life in the booth. Any funny moments, uncontrollable giggles, or memorable incidents?

The booths are still there, although their size varies tremendously. The incidents that still send shivers down interpreters’ spines are when they hear someone make an unflattering comment about a delegate, unaware that the microphone is on.

You mentioned that you once tripped over your tongue and said “exhausting report” instead of “exhaustive report.” Interpreters love these stories. I once rendered “training field” into Spanish as “concentration camp.” Do you have any other juicy bloopers you would like to share?

I once interpreted “Supreme Soviet” as “Supreme Sodium.”

What sort of backlash is there for a stumble like that? You say that confusing the Republic of China with the People’s Republic of China is a serious political error. What are the consequences? Who administers those consequences?

A delegation might protest. The chief of service would explain that this was a slip of the tongue and not a deliberate statement.

If I have understood correctly, you subscribe to the idea that an interpreter is better prepared for the inevitable unknowns if he or she has mastered techniques for coping with the unexpected. So, it’s almost more of an attitude adjustment. Is this one reason some people can’t be interpreters?

No, some people can’t be interpreters because they are unable to comprehend and process quickly enough. They can’t understand what is being said, process it into the vocabulary, syntax, and style required by the target language, and deliver it in an appropriate tone of voice, all while keeping up with the speech regardless of the speaker’s speed.

What are your thoughts on being handed the speaker’s text just minutes before you have to start interpreting his speech?

I always check the first and last paragraphs because those are the ones people remember. Then I check the names, titles, and posts of the people involved.

There are many versions of an apocryphal story about President Carter telling a joke during his speech at the University of New Delhi. The crowd roared with laughter. Carter, who understood that interpreting jokes was a challenge, was curious to know how the interpreter had handled it. The interpreter explained, “I said, ‘President Carter just told a joke. Everybody laugh!’” Have you ever actually witnessed a version of this scenario? Or had a credible report of one?

I remember one case, but not at the UN, where a representative at a conference told a joke and said, “This is really funny.” No one laughed, until the interpreter said “Ha-ha-ha!” and then the whole room cracked up.

As a staff interpreter, you must have had fairly regular contact with people who had

listened to you through their headsets. Did you get feedback of any kind from them?

Yes, both from delegates and colleagues, and feedback is usually extremely helpful, since it’s hard to listen to yourself while you’re interpreting. In the training program, interpreters record themselves, which is very useful, but when you’re at a meeting the feedback can really help.

Is there a time during your career that you remember with particular fondness?

While at the UN, for almost six years, from 1993 to 1998, I was the personal interpreter for the special representative of the Secretary General for Georgia, as the UN was trying to negotiate a settlement to the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict. This involved extensive travel to Georgia and Abkhazia, as well as to other venues for the quadripartite negotiations (the UN, the Russian Federation, Georgia, and Abkhazia). It was fascinating to learn about the negotiating process.

I was also the coordinator for the UN Interpreter Training Program for several years, and very much enjoyed the return to teaching and contact with young interpreters who were just beginning their careers.

Looking back to what you knew when you interpreted for those Soviet tourists and academics some 45 years ago, compared to what you know today, what advice would you have for young interpreters just starting out?

Be sure to follow events reported in the press, watch TV, and listen to the radio in all your languages. Language is infinite; new words, expressions, and idioms are being added every minute. The Internet is a lifesaver, since there is so much information out there. Use it! And try to spend time in your relevant linguistic milieu.

Many thanks for that insider’s view of one of the more fascinating fields in our linguistic universe. ○



Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He moved to Texas in 1980 and currently lives in Austin,

Texas, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. Contact: tony@tonybeckwith.com.