

Interpreting for Soviet leaders: The memoirs of semi-visible men

Introduction

The notion of translator's "invisibility" (Venuti 1995), i.e. an insufficient public and professional recognition of translator's agency, has been an issue for translation scholars and practitioners for quite a long time. It can be claimed that in interpreting this issue is perhaps even more acute, because, as a rule, the interpreter is physically present during an act of interpreting, if only as a voice in someone's earphones, while the translator's physicality tends to be obscured by the lack of immediate witnesses of his or her labours, and subsumed by the physicality of the written or printed text s/he produced.

Their conspicuousness notwithstanding, "it has been the traditional and persistent view that interpreters should be transparent, invisible, passive, neutral, and detached. They should do no more than make a faithful and accurate language switch and are not entitled to intervene in the communication process; they should just translate and they should translate everything; an ideal interpreter should not make people feel his/her presence. <...> In other words, the interpreter is expected to remain invisible and powerless, functioning as a translating machine throughout the communication process" (Mason and Ren 2012: 235-36). This view is often called a conduit model of interpreting.

On the other hand, more recently, "the idea that interpreters are automatons of sorts, emitting in the target language the exact equivalence of what they hear in the source language, has been refuted almost from the moment interpreters were studied in a scholarly fashion. It is now evident that interpreters, just as translators, obey target culture norms <...>, adding/omitting/distorting undesirable textemes <...>, and are likewise engaged in power struggles" (Ben-Ari 2010: 228).

This happens primarily because, in the situations when interlocutors do not know each other's language well enough to communicate efficiently without an intermediary, the "interpreters are the only bilinguals. <...> The knowledge of different linguistic strategies and conversational control mechanisms resides in them alone. This means that the interpreter is an active, third participant with potential to influence both the direction and the outcome of the event, and that the event itself is intercultural and interpersonal rather than simply mechanical and technical" (Roy 2002: 352).

Admittedly, the interpreter's role as the "third participant" may increase or diminish in different settings and circumstances. Thus, according to an influential comprehensive study of conference, court, community and medical interpreters in Mexico, Canada and the US, "medical interpreters perceived themselves as more visible than court or conference interpreters" (Angelelli 2004: 82). This may have a great deal to do with the fact that the "view of the interpreter as an invisible translating machine would appear to be inspired by the technology-based mode of simultaneous conference interpreting, <...> <while> the standard of literalism associated with the conduit model of interpreting is a legal fiction necessitated by the inadmissibility of hearsay evidence (i.e. information reported by someone other than the witness) in the common-law courtroom" (Pöchhacker 2004: 147).

Yet “a growing body of research has shown over the last three decades that the <court> interpreter does not in fact function as a conduit. <...> Contrary to the legal system’s fundamental assumption, interpreters are indeed an intrusive element in legal proceedings, the content of which is inevitably affected by their involvement” (Morris 2010: 21). As for conference interpreters, it has been noted on more than one occasion that even experienced professionals in this line of duty “did not only ‘speak on behalf of the original speaker’ but also regulated turn-taking, resolved overlapping speech, addressed their listeners directly, disclosed the source of problems and interruptions, blended explanatory or compensatory remarks into the speaker’s words, divulged their attitudes, voiced their comments and even criticism towards the speakers or other aspects of the interaction, and responded in self-defence to accusations of misinterpretation” (Pöchhacker 2004: 151).

It would be interesting to establish how “the tension between the interpreter’s role as a responsible human agent and as a ‘communication device’” (Pöchhacker 2009: 180) manifests itself in the work of high-level interpreters for world leaders, when a client may appear especially intimidating and an interpreter’s interference, especially resonant. How do protocol conventions shape the interpreter’s skills and (para-) linguistic behaviour? How does becoming a statesman’s tongue feel, especially if this statesman is a bit of an autocrat? Is the interpreter’s role in enabling a head of a totalitarian state to achieve an important international objective any different from doing the same for a head of a democratic state? Does assisting a dictator affect the interpreter’s work ethic? Do high-level interpreters ever succumb to the temptation of influencing the course of historic events, if only slightly? If yes, do they ever succeed?

Confidentiality agreements rarely afford top interpreters a chance to disclose much, for example, about the so-called one-to-one negotiations between their bosses-cum-customers, at which such interpreters are almost invariably present. Yet the downfall of Nazi Germany and the USSR, for once, did provide some high-level interpreters, especially retirees, with an opportunity to speak out, in interviews and memoirs, without a fear of retribution for a breach of contract. Alas, few of such memoirists and interviewees seem to have told us their full story¹ and some of them did not always tell their story correctly,² either because of memory errors, or a wish to appear more informed and/or prescient than many others, or a strong desire to distance themselves from the people they had worked for.

Still, publications like these contain enough useful material to attempt finding out, to which degree if any, in the service of an all-powerful client, an interpreter remained “invisible”, or exercised a “special interactional power, <...> as a result of his or her bilingual and bicultural expertise” (Mason and Ren 2012: 238),³ and if there existed general trends to this effect. The reminiscences of Soviet interpreters for Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev, as well as these leaders’ closest associates, will be used as a joint case study, with memoirs by the interpreters for Hitler, various British PMs and their respective entourages additionally consulted for cross-correlation.⁴ The primary languages involved will be Russian and English, with occasional references to German, French and Italian.⁵

Semi-visibility

One feature shared by most high-level interpreters with regard to how their clients treat them is that of semi-visibility – and not a full invisibility (even if an interpreter is regarded as belonging to fixtures and fittings, as it were, s/he is never completely unseen, unless of course there is a simultaneous, not consecutive, interpreting involved). Interpreters' presence at receptions, negotiations, press conferences, ceremonies and interviews may or may not be acknowledged; they may or may not get a praise for a job well done – and are somewhat more likely to get noticed when their translation is deemed substandard.

Thus, Berezhkov (1993: 219) recalls: “It seemed to me sometimes that Stalin looked through me, not taking notice of my attendance. However, it soon transpired that he would personally choose one of two interpreters <for a job, Pavlov or me> every time”.⁶ According to Churchill's Russian interpreter A H Birse, Stalin could be occasionally sharp with Birse's regular opposite number Pavlov,⁷ yet would not shy away from a commendation if he felt it was appropriate. At the Yalta conference, for example, he said of Birse, Pavlov and an American interpreter from Russian, Charles E. Bohlen: “We rely on them to transmit our ideas to each other. I propose a toast to our interpreters” (ibid.: 184).⁸ Curiously, Schmidt (1951: 17) describes his first interpreting for Hitler (after years of experience at the German Foreign Office) in fairly similar terms: “I felt that although <Hitler> looked at me, he did not see me”. Yet at the end of the session Hitler said to him: “You did your job splendidly” (ibid.: 19).

It appears that semi-visibility can be both self-imposed (owing to a specific sense of self-worth,⁹ or a training tradition,¹⁰ or a particular set of circumstances¹¹) and inflicted on the interpreter by a customer. In the latter case, it is not caused by, or necessarily limited to, this customer's obvious or latent authoritarian inclinations. Neither can it be explained by the customer's country of origin, political orientation, education, age or state of health. Sukhodrev (2006: 13) observes: “Surprisingly, even the uncouth, uneducated Khrushchev understood with his soul, in a villagy, peasantry way, that without an interpreter he is nothing – and respected those in the profession. I have never even once heard him utter a bad word addressed to me”. Moreover, the neo-Stalinist Brezhnev could apparently teach the liberal Gorbachev a lesson, as far as handling the interpreters was concerned: “Once the official talks with a foreigner were over, Brezhnev, even when decrepit and ill, considered it a must, after saying goodbye to the foreigner, to shake the interpreter's hand and thank him for the job. Gorbachev could not even imagine doing something like that. For him, interpreters were furnishings of sorts, the same as tables, chairs and pencils” (Sukhodrev 1999: 423).¹² For his part, Tony Bishop, the main Russian interpreter for the British PMs from Macmillan to Blair, detects among some of them the unexpected parallels with Brezhnev- and Gorbachev-like attitudes towards interpreters: e.g. the PM John Major “was a pleasure to work for, always appreciative. To one of his Tory predecessors, however, I'd been little more than a piece of furniture” (Knight 2001: 34).

The interpreter usually becomes more visible when s/he is indisposed and there is a danger that this may affect the talks. Erofeev (2004: 97-99) reports how he had hurt his arm once, shortly before the negotiations were due to begin, and Stalin called for his own personal doctor to check if the interpreter was alright. At the 1967 Glassboro summit, President Lyndon B. Johnson asked his doctor to administer painkillers to Sukhodrev (1999: 218), who had had his tooth removed the day before. On another

occasion, during Khrushchev's visit to India in 1960, a sudden stomach upset made Sukhodrev (1999: 174-75) interrupt his translation for Khrushchev at an extremely short notice and rush for his hotel room (fortunately, a replacement interpreter was promptly found). Khrushchev's personal doctor was later sent to Sukhodrev to treat him.

Another thing that comes into conflict with demands on interpreters' invisibility is the bodily need for food. As Sukhodrev (1999: 7) puts it, "the interpreter works at posh, exquisite banquets, breakfasts, lunches, when meals are a joy for anybody but him, because he can barely eat", so busy he normally is with his job. Birse (1967: 145) defines this well-known difficulty as being "doomed to go hungry in the midst of all that plenty". Schmidt (1951: 22) even developed a personal technique for coping with the problem: "While my client stopped eating to give me his text I would eat, and then translate while he ate. This procedure came to be recognized by *chefs de protocole* as an ingenious solution for interpreters at banquets".

However, such a solution did not work for everyone all the time and an eating interpreter could find himself in trouble. Once, at a dinner hosted by Stalin, Berezhkov, who "did not eat all day, felt very hungry and decided to have a bite. When a guest started speaking, he cut himself a slice of meat and began chewing it. Suddenly Stalin interrupted the guest and said something. This had to be translated immediately but Berezhkov was still struggling with the meat. An awkward pause ensued. Stalin turned to Berezhkov and asked severely: "Have you come here to eat?" (Sukhodrev 1999: 338). At an official banquet in Nepal in 1960, the powerful Politburo members Ekaterina Furtseva and Frol Kozlov demonstrated a little more understanding when they decided to be silent for a while to give their interpreters Iurii Vinogradov and Sukhodrev a chance to leave the festive table in turn, to have something to eat in a different room (Sukhodrev 1999: 162).

Bodily wants are of course the more obvious but not the only manifestations of interpreters' interactional power. This power can also be exercised, with different degrees of subtlety, by "adopting the stance of co-interlocutor in the exchange, making moves which empower a certain party, and/or adopting a non-neutral stance" (Mason and Ren 2012: 242).

Co-interlocution

As co-interlocutors, interpreters may sometimes "withhold certain information that they deem inappropriate (vulgar remarks, cultural taboos, etc.) or irrelevant, even if they are trained not to do so" (Mason and Ren 2012: 243). Thus, Troianovskii was "known to omit some of Khrushchev's frequent references to God (an unthinking habit typical of the Russian peasantry), which the interpreter deemed inappropriate for a communist leader" (Roland 1999: 167). Also, Sukhodrev (1999: 155-56, 213) describes how he took upon himself softening the tone of a 1960 emotional tirade by the Soviet head of state Voroshilov, stating to Jawaharlal Nehru that only Khrushchev could discuss an arms deal with India; and correcting the Soviet PM Kosygin who mistakenly claimed during a visit to London that the Briton Gerald Brooke, arrested in 1965 in the USSR for smuggling anti-Soviet literature, was a spy.¹³

Such “Saved by the Interpreter” situations are not of course limitable to Soviet leaders alone. Troianovskii cites how in 1954 in Geneva, the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, when speaking to the Chinese PM and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai, allegedly compared the perceived Chinese ingratitude towards the Americans to a dog biting the hand that feeds it. However, “Eden's interpreter caught this in time and moderated the words of his boss, so that the utterance passed almost unnoticed” (Troianovskii 1997: 182).

Curiously, to act as a co-interlocutor, the interpreter does not always need to translate from one language to another. Thus, while on Ribbentrop's ministerial train during Germany's war with Poland, Schmidt (1951: 161) “had to maintain routine communication with the Berlin office, and needed all my capabilities as an interpreter. <...> A rain of ‘cowards’, ‘lazybones’, ‘dunderheads’ and ‘people who don't seem to know there's a war on’ came from the Minister's coach, and had to be transformed before it reached its destination”.

At times, during an act of co-interlocution, words themselves play a secondary role, when the interpreter manages to make his/her clients feel that not only their thoughts but also their emotions become faithfully reproduced. Hitler's sometime interpreter from Italian, Dr Eugen Dollmann, a scholar who had never been trained as an interpreter but lived in Italy for years and was able to speak Italian fluently, was wandering why Hitler apparently liked his interpreting style, even though Dollmann (1967: 144) “was generally regarded as anything but an exponent of literal translation. Perhaps my success was due to my ability – and this was Adolf Hitler's view – to ‘photograph’ well. <...> A ‘photographic’ interpreter not only renders words, sentences and speeches, but captures the whole tone of what has been said and embodies it in his translation”.

Birse (1967: 109) independently confirms the same: “a good oral translator will reproduce with the right emphasis and in the right tone what his chief has said”. Churchill's another interpreter from Russian, Hugh Lunghi (1999) – like Birse, bilingual since childhood and ordered to become an interpreter during his military service at WWII – also maintained that interpreters' goal was to transmit, among other things, what he called “the tone of the score”. The importance of an appropriate pitch for an interpreter was also recognized by Molotov, for example. According to Troianovskii (1997: 138-39), when the question of German reparations to the USSR was discussed by the allied foreign ministers, Molotov asked him to deliver the sentence “We don't request reparations, we demand them” in “as weighty a tone as possible. I followed his instructions so zealously that some people even shuddered”. Berezikov (1993: 369) recalls that he too, when interpreting for Stalin, strove to convey his thoughts with all their “colour shades and modulations”.

To achieve such an effect, a certain meeting of minds between the interpreter and his/her customer, if only temporary and illusory, appears to be necessary. Birse (1967: 109) describes the process of co-interlocution as follows (not using the term itself): “The speaker can unconsciously inspire his interpreter by his character, intellect, way of speaking, and manners.¹⁴ On the other hand, the interpreter should try to inspire confidence, so that the chief will not interrupt his train of thought by wondering whether he is being ‘got across’.¹⁵ I have often felt an urge to integrate my thought in that of my chief, and I feel that a kind of mental harmony should exist between the

two, to produce the best results”. If such an instance indeed occurs, it may lead the interpreter and his/her customer to moments of mutual empowerment.

Empowerment

In a standard meaning of the term, interpreters’ empowerment action encompasses “the verbal or non-verbal strategies they employ to enable a disadvantaged party to have better access to information, to take a turn to speak, to decide on their own to do or not to do something” (Mason and Ren 2012: 243). Perhaps the word “disadvantaged” requires a clarification here. It should be understood to cover such occasions when the interpreter resorts to empowerment not necessarily to strengthen the weak but to make the strong even stronger, or to give all the negotiating parties an equal chance. In this context, not taking a turn to speak may prove just as impactful as taking it. Hitler, for example, was grateful to Schmidt (1951: 19) after their first interpreting session together, for allowing him to express himself unhindered: “I had no idea that interpreting could be done like that. Hitherto I have always had to stop after each sentence for it to be translated”.¹⁶

However, once the precedent had been established, it was not an easy task to shut Hitler up, even if the occasion called for it rather urgently. At the heated negotiations with the British delegation during the Sudeten crisis in September 1938, he “let himself go more violently than I ever saw him do during a diplomatic interview. <...> It was one of the rare occasions when I failed to assert myself as an interpreter against Hitler” (Schmidt 1951: 103). It is of course an interpreter’s duty “to impose priorities on the primary parties’ turn-taking behaviour and to structure the flow of discourse in a gatekeeping capacity” (Pöchhacker 2004: 59), but it is not always possible to fulfill this duty satisfactorily.

In critical situations, a mediating intervention may be undertaken by an interpreter, who can perform it as “an active third party, rather than remain neutral and ‘invisible’” (ibid.). In the course of hammering out the Munich agreement, with German and Italian representatives on the one side of the tempestuous argument, and French and British on the other, Schmidt (1951: 103, 110) did succeed “in restoring order by calling the attention of Hitler, or of some other speaker who had interrupted heatedly, to the fact that I had not finished my translation. <...> On each occasion I asked to be allowed to translate to the end, so that the other participants were kept in the picture. <...> When I demanded that my translations should be heard I looked like a schoolmaster trying to keep an unruly class in order”.

Empowerment is not necessarily restricted to acts of interpreting *per se*, especially as far as information access is concerned. If during interpreting an interpreter unexpectedly comes across a valuable piece of information, it is not always possible to utilize it immediately, as sharing it with those who matter may have to be postponed. At a US-Soviet summit meeting in Paris on 16 May 1960, when Khrushchev demanded the US apologies over Gary Powers’s reconnaissance flight, Sukhodrev (1999: 107-08) overheard how President Eisenhower said to the Secretary of State Christian Herter: “‘I can’t see a reason why we shouldn’t make a similar statement, too’, to which Herter replied: ‘No, we shouldn’t do that’. <...> Needless to say, I told Khrushchev about this short dialogue <...>. Khrushchev nodded slightly and frowned”.

For his part, in October 1977, at the first meeting in the Kremlin between Brezhnev the British Foreign Secretary David Owen, Tony Bishop overheard “an irritable Brezhnev asking: ‘Does <Owen> merit a cup of tea?’ – i.e. ‘How much time should we give this man?’ His Foreign Minister spotted I had registered this and quickly responded: ‘Tea? Of course, the English like their tea!’ I told Owen’s adviser later but I thought it best to withhold this from Owen himself” (Knight 2001: 35).

As information suppliers, high-level interpreters were useful not only because they would occasionally overhear things they were not supposed to. Given that most Soviet interpreters were career diplomats with a better knowledge and experience of life and customs outside the USSR than their domestic clients, it is hardly surprising that Soviet leaders asked these interpreters for informal advice on all sorts of issues, sometimes well outside their normal interpreting duties. Stalin, of all people, was interested in Troianovskii’s (1997: 160) opinion of who was the most promising politician among the 1947 British Labour Party delegation to the USSR, led by Konni Zilliacus.¹⁷

As a rule, high-level interpreters do not seem to volunteer their opinions and suggestions until they are encouraged to do so. When asked, Sukhodrev (1999: 46, 204, 279, 275-76, 345) offered to Kwame Nkrumah, a guest at Khrushchev’s Crimean residence, a topic to speak on (the Non-Aligned Movement); to the Soviet PM Nikolai Tikhonov at Indira Gandhi’s funeral, a wording for a condolence book (“Together with the entire Indian nation, we are saddened by the untimely demise of India’s great daughter”); to President Nixon, a phrase in Russian for a speech (“Glory to the heroes of Leningrad!”); and to Brezhnev, emotional support after meeting President Nixon for the first time (“Viktor, you took part in many such meetings. How did my first conversation with Nixon go, do you think?”) and after sharing a kiss with President Carter when signing the SALT-II protocols in Vienna (“Tell me, Viktor, was it ok for me to kiss Carter? It was him who started it, anyway...”).

For his part, Palazchenko (1997: 52-53, 93), also when asked, helped the Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze to make sense of a meeting with President Reagan; and Gorbachev, to make a decision whether to invite the Reagans to a private supper at Gorbachev’s dacha in Moscow. However, Sukhodrev (1999: 201, 312) did not need to be asked to suggest that at the funeral of the Indian PM Lal Bahadur Shastri, Kosygin should avoid Dalai Lama for fear of upsetting the Chinese; and that President Nixon’s wife should not be woken up at 2am to receive personal gifts from Brezhnev.

Interpreters’ guidance was sought on matters well beyond pure politics. At Churchill’s birthday party at the British Legation in Tehran, Birse (1967: 160) was told by Stalin: “This is a fine collection of cutlery! It is a problem which to use. You will have to tell me, and also when I can begin to eat. I am unused to your customs”. Then Stalin took Birse’s “advice to eat and drink when it pleased him”. Stalin also asked Birse “whether it would be in order for him to drink the health of our <Persian> waiter. I said I was sure he could do so, and that the man would be very happy”. Sukhodrev (1999: 401, 374, 302-03, 304-05) had to buy clothes abroad for Soviet leaders at the request of the Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko; advise Gromyko on which aperitif to choose; and explain to Brezhnev what aperitif actually is and which spare parts, if any, his American-built limousine may need in the future.

Non-neutrality

Does the interpreter's advising function make him/her non-neutral? Not necessarily so. It has been observed that, although "deep down every party wants the interpreter to be his/her own interpreter" (Bahadir 2010: 132), "interpreters' aversion to blatant alignment with one of the parties" (Angelelli 2004: 69) is also in evidence. As we have seen from the examples above, interpreters can provide help to either party, albeit they naturally tend to spend more time with their own team. It can be said that "strict neutrality is required of interpreters, yet cultural identity and social affiliation are so strong that they may, perhaps even unconsciously, affect actual behavior" (Mason and Ren 2012: 247). However, it is by no means guaranteed that the interpreter would automatically align with the side that has brought him/her to the negotiating table. After all, "who else if not the interpreter is capable of judging soberly the reasonability of statements and behaviour of those s/he is interpreting for?" (Ermolovich 2005: 91).

As one experienced member of the profession admitted, at a number of political talks he did live through "moments when the interpreter almost wants to shout: 'Stop! There's got to be a better way to do it. Why not take a break, come back in an hour, and see if there's a chance to come to terms'" (Palazchenko 1997: 73). Undoubtedly, such an emotion lays the blame for the inability to find a compromise at the feet of either negotiating side. Yet the same interpreter also found himself disagreeing more than once with the side that he was expected to feel most loyalty to – for example, when interpreting at Gorbachev's press-conference after the failure of the 1991 August coup. Palazchenko (1997: 316) listened in disbelief to Gorbachev's professed intention to reform the CPSU, instead of disbanding it: "I never allow my mind to be deflected when I interpret, but this time, even as I was speaking into the microphone, I thought, 'This will cost him dearly'".

What is the interpreter supposed to do in the cases when his/her opinion diverges from the opinion of the speaker s/he working for? A fairly common scenario is outlined by Sukhodrev (1999: 116, 118-19) when he comments on Khrushchev's car journey through New York one September day in 1960, at which his co-passenger Gromyko tried to draw his attention to what seemed to Gromyko a particularly advanced American building construction technique. Khrushchev summarily (and, in Sukhodrev's view, unfairly) dismissed this technique out of hand. "In my worst nightmare", says Sukhodrev, "I could not imagine trying to support my minister's view, or, God forbid, express my own. <...> Yet I visualized for a minute how Khrushchev, under the influence of the above-named occurrence, would begin to teach Americans what he believed the best building practice was. And I would be standing next to his shoulder, as usual, interpreting everything that the PM would say, literally, loyally and faithfully, while realizing deep inside, of course, that I am voicing utter nonsense. And this would be obvious to any sane person. Yet I will keep interpreting. Because this is my profession. This is my job. This is my duty".

Schmidt (1951: 153) found himself in a much worse quandary – a real one, not imaginary – shortly before the outbreak of WWII. When at the German-British emergency talks Ribbentrop refused to pass over to Henderson Germany's proposals to resolve the Danzig and Corridor question peacefully (having read them to him in

German, which Henderson understood), “seldom have I so much regretted that, as interpreter, I could not intervene in the discussion. To say something on his own account is a mortal sin in an interpreter. By so doing he cannot but create confusion. So there was nothing for me to do but to sit by grinding my teeth while a chance of peace was deliberately sabotaged before my eyes”.

However, as the unexpressed non-neutrality can easily be taken for neutrality proper, Hitler had apparently never doubted Schmidt, and even said of the 1938 one-to-one negotiations at Berchtesgaden with Neville Chamberlain, who did not have an interpreter of his own: “Of course Herr Schmidt must be there as interpreter <...> but as an interpreter he is neutral, and forms part of neither group” (Schmidt 1951: 91).¹⁸ Hitler was not the only statesman to put faith in an interpreter’s neutrality. During President Nixon’s 1972 visit to the USSR, in the Kremlin, where he stayed, Sukhodrev had to inform him that Brezhnev had requested an urgent unscheduled one-to-one meeting with him, and he could take his interpreter with him if he so wished. “The President was slightly surprised <...> but evidently excited, and agreed without any hesitation, adding that he will come without his own interpreter because he fully trusts me” (Sukhodrev 1999: 267).

Yet the issues of neutrality and trust would sometimes come under scrutiny even when the interpreters from both sides were present. Birse (1967: 113) became accustomed to cooperating with Pavlov closely on interpreting matters: “If either of us got stuck fast over some phrase, the other would at once quietly suggest the right way out. If either of us had doubts about the other’s correctness in translation, we would raise the query on the spot, to which our respective chiefs appeared to have no objection”. Stalin did not seem to mind, although he played one interpreter against the other and was not altogether happy about his dependence on someone whom he could not fully understand. Once Stalin “turned to me with a grin and asked: ‘Is Pavlov interpreting correctly?’ Later, when Pavlov and I exchanged a few words about the correctness of some military term, he said to Eden: ‘These interpreters have a language of their own. We are completely in their hands’” (ibid., 144). However, as the Western-Soviet relations at the end of WWII started cooling off, the interpreters’ collaboration had to cease. Molotov forbade Pavlov to help Birse double-check a translation passage in the notes (habitually used for a full transcript of the talks after their conclusion): “‘Why are you helping the other side? <...> Each interpreter must stand or fall by his own notes. They are not for discussion’. I remember the embarrassed look Pavlov gave me” (ibid., 200).

A certain dose of skepticism about an interpreter’s neutrality would not occasionally go amiss.¹⁹ After all, Schmidt, whose loyalty record was seemingly beyond reproach, confessed (1951: 153): when on the night of 30 August 1939 Ribbentrop denied showing Henderson a list of German demands to be met if WWII were to be avoided, Schmidt, who was the only other person present at the scene, “made one last desperate attempt to transmit the contents of the document to Henderson, gazing at him fixedly and wishing him silently willing him to ask for an English translation of the German proposals. Ribbentrop could scarcely have refused this, and I would have translated so slowly that Henderson could have taken notes. But the British Ambassador did not react”.

Remarkably, in this dramatic incident, the non-neutral interpreter, reduced to silence, resorts to one of the two “particular ways in which the exercise of power <by the interpreter> surfaces in observable behavior” (Mason and Ren 2012: 244), namely in the direction and eloquence of the interpreter’s gaze. It is hard to deny that “gaze behavior can exert influence” (ibid., 247), even though on this occasion, sadly, it did not.

Positioning

The other observable manifestation of the interpreter's exercise of power (or lack thereof) is known as “positioning (in terms of positions offered and accepted or rejected)” (ibid., 244). It is not of course a rank, a post or a status that is being implied, but the interpreter’s location with regard to his/her client. In Schmidt’s words (1951: 34), “if it be true that clothes make the man, it may also be said that the position of the seat makes the interpreter”.

It has to be acknowledged that the protocol services do not always assist the interpreter efficiently enough in choosing the most strategic of available places. It is not often that an interpreter seats or stands at the centre, as it happened to Sukhodrev (1999: 32), when he translated Khrushchev’s interview to the CBS (“Khrushchev to the left of me, the Americans to my right”). More common is a situation described by Birse, who attached great significance to interpreters’ positioning and even included in his memoirs schemes of seating arrangements at various official occasions (1967: 183, 209). Birse recalls how at a 1943 tripartite conference in Moscow, led by Eden, Molotov and the US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, “I sat at some distance from the other two Heads of Delegation, the American and the Soviet. This distance <...> was almost my undoing” (ibid., 141), because it made it difficult for him to hear, and be heard by, the speakers.

To avoid such eventualities, Stalin and Gorbachev liked to position their interpreters personally whenever possible. Thus, in 1943 in Tehran, before meeting Roosevelt for the first time, Stalin said to Berezhkov (1993: 251): “I’ll sit here, on the edge <of this sofa>. Roosevelt will come in a wheelchair. Let’s place him to the left of this armchair, in which you’ll be sitting”. Similarly, in June 1987 in Moscow, at his talks with the Zimbabwean PM Robert Mugabe in the Kremlin, Gorbachev asked the interpreter Korchilov if he “minded sitting next to him <i.e. Gorbachev>, rather than at the head of the table, as had been customary for interpreters until then. I was pleasantly astonished at this change” (Korchilov 1997: 32).

Usually, positioning does depend on who is hosting and arranging the talks, especially the seating at the meals. Generally speaking, “interpreting at official dinners is not the kind of assignment most interpreters relish. As a rule, the interpreter is seated behind the host and must contend with the waiters (accidents can result from awkward movements of waiters, interpreters or guests). <...> It is often noisy and you almost have to shout so you can be heard at the other end of the table” (Palazchenko 1997: 43).

At a ceremonial reception in Moscow in 1940, Berezhkov as an interpreter fully expected “to get a chair in the second row, as it were, between the host <Mikoyan> and the main guest <the German envoy Karl Ritter>. But I was given cutlery, just like

everyone else, and placed <at the table> to the left of Mikoyan” (1993: 162). Palazchenko also recalls that when Gorbachev was hosting dinners, he “would ask that a place be reserved for me at the table, and I felt a lot better” (1997: 43) – not because he was shown due respect but because it made the interpreting easier. Yet it was not uncommon that interpreters had to fight for their right to be at the most suitable location to do their job well – and did not always emerge as winners. Thus, shortly before a working dinner at the US Embassy in Vienna in 1979, with Carter and Brezhnev present, Sukhodrev (1999: 336) found out that there was no room for the interpreters at the table. He brought this matter to the attention of the protocol officials on both sides. The Americans suggested that after the dinner guests had been seated, Sukhodrev and his American colleague could take a chair each and seat behind their leaders’ backs. Sukhodrev refused to do so and exited into an adjacent room. The American interpreter, who presumably could neither effectively argue with, nor rebel against, his own protocol service, had no other choice but to interpret alone.²⁰

Another typical problem with positioning that high-level interpreters come across is the photo op, at which the tendency is to exclude them from the picture. During Nixon’s trip to the Crimea in 1974, Nixon’s press secretary Ronald Ziegler insisted that Sukhodrev (1999: 317) should avoid getting into the same camera shot with Nixon and Brezhnev, when they would stop by the journalists. Sukhodrev tried to oblige – but had to speak louder than usual. Fifteen years later or so, in 1988, a similar situation arose during Gorbachev’s visit to New York. “The White House public relations people had arranged a photo opportunity against the backdrop of <...> the Statue of Liberty. A podium was installed for Gorbachev, Reagan and Bush. <...> ‘It’s the three of them only’, the White House people insisted. ‘They’ll find a way to communicate. An interpreter would ruin the picture’. It was decided that I and my US colleague would stand near the podium, which was at least a couple of feet high, and shout up the translation of whatever the three men said. As could be expected, the arrangement did not quite work” (Palazchenko 1997: 107).

Apparently, some things in the high-level interpreting business rarely change. And Soviet press was not any different from the American in this respect. Korchilov (1997: 30-31) recalls how interpreters used to be retroactively removed “from the pictures showing Soviet leaders with their foreign guests, making it seem as though in their infinite wisdom Soviet leaders conversed with their counterparts from whatever country in that foreign language. <...> <Once> an official photo in *Pravda* showed Brezhnev seated in his Kremlin office facing his foreign guest across the table. In between them, at the end of the long T-shaped table, the observant reader could clearly see an open notebook and a pencil that was suspended at a precarious forty-five-degree angle with no visible means of support. A minor miracle, so to speak! The photo editors obliterated the face of the interpreter, but forgot his notebook and the pencil”.

Conclusions

The three latest graphic examples of top interpreters fully or nearly airbrushed out of history return us to their semi-visibility, which they naturally share with all other interpreters. How do high-level interpreters cope with “the schizophrenic situation in which they are expected to be there and not there at the same time” (Bahadir 2010:

127) and is there anything in this situation that may make them feel in any way different from the rest of the profession members?²¹

Such differences do exist but they do not seem very significant. After all, before entering the elite squad (mostly associated with consecutive interpreting for world leaders and their close circle), many high-level interpreters gain experience by doing consecutive and simultaneous interpreting for more ordinary members of the public, as well as telephone negotiations (by hotline if necessary) and speech and official documents transcription and translation. They largely continue their engagement with such translation and interpreting formats both during and after their time in the elite squad (unless their departure from it coincides for some reason with leaving the interpreting/translation profession altogether). Therefore, they can identify full well, it appears, with their colleagues in a less glamorous line of duty.

Still, there are at least two kinds of differences between the topmost interpreting and the interpreting at lower rungs, so to speak. The first seems to be that, even though interpreting for movers and shakers, like any job, has its own routine, it is arguably somewhat more exciting than the interpreting routine in other walks of life, partly because it gives one a sense of matchlessness²² and acting on the world stage. This is probably why the role metaphors that high-level interpreters apply to themselves tend to differ from the more customary ones. While interpreters' function is usually "compared to a machine, a window, a bridge and a telephone line" (Roy 2002: 347), Lunghi (1999) asserts that "you can't be just a translating machine", and likens the interpreter to a "concert artist". For his part, Dollmann (1967: 144) states: "a really first-rate interpreter has to participate or simulate participation in all that is enacted in his presence, from light-hearted interludes and formal exchanges of every shade to so-called historic decisions taken in deadly earnest. It is like a theatrical performance". Describing his own work as an interpreter, Korchilov (1997: 21, 23) uses the term *perevoploshchenie*, or identification with someone else's (fictional) personality – a cornerstone in Konstantin Stanislavsky's influential system of actor training.

The other important difference is that, unlike with customers in a court, hospital, prison or conference room, high-level interpreters often work long hours for the same people over a significant period of time and sometimes even continue socialising with them after the day's work. This may result in the interpreter's informed judgement about the top customer as a human being. Also, this may lead to developing a stronger bond between the top interpreter and the top customer than would normally happen in a less select group of people.

Does it mean that high-level interpreters can influence their customers in the way that others in the customers' retinues cannot? Yes and no. In small things, maybe – but never too often, it appears, and never in anything of vital importance. When Kosygin's 1971 official visit in Canada was coming to an end, Sukhodrev (1999: 236-37) took upon himself an initiative of asking him to thank in a farewell toast a group of Canadian interpreters, who were temporarily attached to the Soviet delegation and were either born in the USSR or had Soviet roots. Kosygin promised to do it and forgot, so Sukhodrev had to remind him again. Only then Kosygin did say something warm and touching.

However, to the best of my knowledge, in the period under consideration, interpreters' influence has never stretched anywhere as far as altering the course of history. Dollmann explains why: "In summer 1945, when I was privileged to be an involuntary guest of the Intelligence Service Centre in Rome, a senior British officer asked why I had not prevented Italy from entering the Second World War. I endeavoured to explain that any such intervention would have far exceeded the scope and potential of an interpreter. I should like to have seen Mussolini's face if I had gone to him with such a suggestion! I got on very well with him, but he only credited me with political influence when things began to go badly for him. Dictators do not listen to their advisers until they are at their wit's end" (Dollmann 1967: 185).

Even though not all top interpreters' clients answer the description of a dictator, the point made by Dollmann seems to retain its validity for all politicians of high standing: when working for them, interpreters are meant to know their place,²³ and saving the world is just not in interpreters' job description. What the interpreters can do, however, when their chiefs have left the public arena, is to provide us with an eyewitness account, often in the "what the butler saw" mode,²⁴ as a coping mechanism in the form of an exercise in visibility increase,²⁵ and an attempt at influencing the events post factum by supplementing the public record with their own version of history, replete with little known details.²⁶

As a whole, the memoirs of high-level interpreters, both in Soviet Russia and beyond, seem to share many of their features with the professional folklore of an elite group of interpreters at the late Soviet Foreign Ministry, as described by Palazchenko (1997: 14): "All the stories, anecdotes and jokes were about the big bosses of the past and present. In most of those stories, the big shots did not look very good. They were depicted as haughty, often ill-informed, and sometimes downright incompetent. The leaders of foreign countries did not fare much better. In all the stories, the interpreter stood out as a towering presence – always calm, ingenious and ready to smooth things over and correct the mistakes and stupidities of others". If Yeltsin's, Putin's and Medvedev's top English interpreter Andrei Tsybenko (on him see, for example, Vandysheva 2001; and Arteel 2013: 10) is planning to write and publish a book of memoirs, it would be interesting to see how far it deviates from this canon.

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Notes

¹ Cf. "no interpreter will reveal everything that was said in <...> private discussions and conversations, for this is clearly outside his prerogative" (Korchilov 1997: 15-16).

² Thus, Stalin's interpreter into English and German, Valentin Berezhkov (1993: 50-51), depicts how on 22 June 1941 he witnessed Ribbentrop's announcement of the war with the USSR to the Soviet ambassador Dekanozov. Ostensibly, Ribbentrop was drunk and whispered that he was against the war but Hitler simply could not be dissuaded. Recalling the same occasion, another eyewitness, Hitler's polymath interpreter Dr Paul Schmidt (1951: 234), mentions neither Ribbentrop's drunkenness, nor his whispering to Dekanozov, nor even Berezhkov's presence (Stalin's another regular interpreter, Vladimir Pavlov, is named instead). On interpreters' memoirs as a possible historical source, see Salevsky 2014.

³ "Interpreters can exercise this unique power by adopting certain verbal and non-verbal strategies to coordinate the communication <...>, to negotiate, check, and re-balance the power relations, thus exerting a certain influence on the direction and outcome of the interaction" (ibid.).

⁴ As a "modern summit protocol presupposes the participation of interpreters from both sides, when each interpreter interprets for his or her own team" (Ermolovich 2005: 87), it is always helpful to compare, if available, different interpreters' accounts of the same people and events.

⁵ All the top interpreters' memoirs I have managed to find have been written by men, even though women are also involved in interpreting at this level. Thus, Khrushchev's, Brezhnev's and Gorbachev's interpreter from English, Viktor Sukhodrev (1999: 90, 281), mentions Tatiana Sirotina (USSR), while Gorbachev's interpreters from English, Igor Korchilov (1997: 48, 94) and Pavel Palazchenko (1997: pictures' insert), respectively name Carolyn Smith and Galina Tunik (USA). There are, however, several (sometimes fictionalized) memoirs and interviews available by female WWII interpreters; see, for example, Zhdanova 2009; and Rogiers 2013.

⁶ All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

⁷ Cf.: "Get on with it, don't dawdle, and for God's sake speak a humanly understandable Russian" (Birse 1967: 113). Pavlov was not the only interpreter to provoke Stalin's irritation. According to Stalin's interpreter from French Vladimir Erofeev (quoted by his son Viktor in Erofeev 2004: 54), Vladimir's predecessor was sacked after Stalin had told him: "I have an impression that I know French better than you". Sometimes, however, Stalin could be tolerant to interpreters' mistakes. One of his English interpreters, Oleg Troianovskii, remembers how, during the 1947 British Labour Party delegation's visit to Stalin's dacha in the Caucasus, "I got confused, probably under stress, and began to repeat Stalin's words in Russian, instead of translating him into English. At first those present could not understand what was going on, and then started laughing. Then Stalin embraced me, as if expressing compassion for the tired interpreter" (Troianovskii 1997: 156).

⁸ Churchill immediately joined in, exclaiming: "Interpreters of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your audience!" (ibid.: 184-85). Incidentally, Vladimir Erofeev (2004: 99-100) relates how Stalin offered him a glass of champagne for translating a René Clair film at a private screening.

⁹ Cf.: When interpreting, "I was so absorbed in the work, with only one desire, to accomplish it perfectly, that I seemed to have no existence of my own. <...> I had been the 'voice' of several men directing world affairs <...> but <...> I preferred a quieter life" (Birse 1967: 112, 202). Birse was a British banker, who spoke Russian like a native because he was born and grew up in St Petersburg before the revolution. He left Russia after the Bolsheviks came to power. During WWII, he was drafted in

the British army, where his fluency in Russian helped him become an extremely successful self-taught interpreter.

¹⁰ Cf.: “The aerobatics of my profession consists of becoming somehow invisible yet present” (Sukhodrev 1999: 7). During WWII, Sukhodrev lived in the UK for six years as a child and spoke English like a native, yet later also received training as a translator and interpreter at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow. According to the dominant Soviet school of thought, the quality of interpreting is in reverse proportion to the interpreter’s visibility (see Sadikov 1981: 9). This view still remains influential, cf. “There are no significant academic and practical reasons to defend the concept of interpreter’s/translator’s non-transparency” (Buzadzhi 2009: 36).

¹¹ At a stormy private meeting between Ribbentrop and the British Ambassador Henderson, on the eve of WWII, 30 August 1939, it nearly came to blows. Their interpreter would rather be elsewhere: “Ribbentrop jumped up from his chair. <...> Henderson, too, had risen to his feet. Both men glared at each other. According to diplomatic convention I too should have risen; but to be frank I did not quite know how an interpreter should behave when speakers passed from words to deeds. <...> I therefore remained quietly seated and pretended to be writing in my notebook” (Schmidt 1951: 152).

¹² However, Korchilov (1997: 37) recalls that, after he had first interpreted for Gorbachev in June 1987, he “took my hand in both of his, warmly shook it and said simply: ‘Thank you very much for a job well done’”.

¹³ Sukhodrev (1999: 212) explains: “we interpreters have an unspoken rule, when translating, to correct the customer’s obvious slip of tongue without attracting attention to it”.

¹⁴ Cf. Erofeev’s confession (2004: 54) that Stalin’s “charm” affected him strongly; and Palazchenko’s (1997: 26) first impressions of Gorbachev: “It was impossible not to like the man”.

¹⁵ Cf.: After the first meeting of allied foreign ministers, mentioned above, Molotov “asked those present what my translation sounded like and if it fully corresponded to what had been said <in the original>. After an affirmative answer, he’d never made another similar enquiry again” (Troianovskii 1997: 139).

¹⁶ Churchill also “preferred not to be interrupted by the translation until he had finished” (Birse 1967: 156).

¹⁷ Troianovskii was only twenty-eight at the time but he had grown up in the US as a Soviet ambassador’s son and worked in the mid-1940s as a diplomatic attaché in the UK.

¹⁸ Schmidt (1951: 95) observes: “What a mark of confidence it had been that none of the foreigners for whom I had interpreted, from Herriot and Briand to Henderson, McDonald and Laval, had ever in all these years brought their own interpreter, but had always relied on my services”.

¹⁹ Cf. the notions of “double agent” and “double loyalty” attached to the interpreter as a fictional character (Ben-Ari 2010: 228, 230).

²⁰ It does not necessarily get any better with time. As recent as 2009 and 2011, the Bulgarian protocol services prevented Boris Naimushin (2017), a free lance Russian and English interpreter, from sharing the stage with the Bulgarian president Georgi Parvanov and PM Boyko Borisov respectively. Naimushin even had to jostle for a single microphone with the latter. This did not help Naimushin’s translation one single bit.

²¹ Cf. an alternative but no less accurate description of the professional interpreter: “someone who is there only when he is not, a human-like figure who exists only when he ceases to be what he is, so as better to transfer what other people think and say” (Ben-Ari 2010: 232).

²² Birse says: “The fascination of my work lay in its diversity; I had learnt to take everything in my stride” (1967: 188), and admits that by the time he stopped interpreting for the dignitaries, he had “been “thoroughly spoilt, and it required an effort to do more humble work patiently and conscientiously” (ibid., 171).

²³ Cf.: “The interpreter has to relate correctly his social status to the social status of other participants in the act of interpreting, and to take steps aimed at limiting the visibility of his/her personality, when the situation is such that the participants’ social status is very different” (Uvarov 1981: 14).

²⁴ From Sukhodrev, the reader learns that Churchill’s son Randolph drunk cognac for breakfast, Brezhnev slept with female flight attendants and Gromyko wore thermal underwear even in the hot Indonesian climate.

²⁵ Just like cameramen filming various live broadcasts sometime show each other in the frame, interpreters, eager to enhance their profession’s visibility, regularly mention other interpreters in memoirs and interviews, usually in complimentary terms. For example, Troianovskii (1997: 234), Korchilov (1997: 25-26) and Palazchenko (1997: 26, 37) speak highly of Sukhodrev, while Sukhodrev (1999: 24) speaks favourably of Troianovskii.

²⁶ Almost every top interpreter memoirist includes an account of how their bosses spoke. On Hitler’s manner, see, for example, Schmidt 1951: 17-18; on Stalin’s, see Troianovskii 1997: 149; on Churchill’s, see Lunghi 1999; and on Gorbachev, see Palazchenko 1997: 72 and Korchilov 1997: 34, 38-40.