

Just my interpretation

by Tony Beckwith (c) 1997

AT A RECENT FAMILY GATHERING the conversation gradually edged around to the obligatory "Status Of Your Business" (SOYB) report. I had just returned from an interpreting assignment at a conference in Washington, DC, so I talked about that. When I finished, one of the cousins said, "Sounds great, doesn't it? Making money just by talking." Rather than shoot him on the spot and create an unpleasant family incident, I looked around for my high horse (his name is "Dudgeon"), hoping to mount up and ride out of the room. But the moment passed, and I just had to let it all go.

There is much that is misunderstood about interpreting: most of all, perhaps, that it can be so much fun. It reminds me of skiing. When I'm having a good day, my mind is swift and sharp and clear. I weave gracefully around confusing statements; I slalom through impenetrable logic; I race down rhetorical slopes with perfect rhythmic control, leaning in close to the speaker's meaning and hugging the contour of the day's presentation. I am alone in the universe, speeding across a mountain range of words, my mind alive and exhilarated, thrilling to the rush of swooping, headlong motion.

Of course, when I'm not having a good day, I can't even seem to keep my speech running parallel to my thoughts and I lose my balance at the easiest

turn of phrase. I stumble over acronyms, slam into statistics, my mind slides across the room, and I sink into deep drifts of powdery innuendo. On days like that I'd rather be translating at home, where I can reach for a dictionary and take time to think. Where I am surrounded by resources and references as I plow into the unknown.

As an interpreter, unfamiliar acronyms and jargon make me nervous. If the speaker said, "...we were standing around talking about our SOYBs," I would be safe if I recognized the code for "Status Of Your Business." If I didn't, I would have no choice but to repeat those same letters in the target language and hope for the best.

Research is obviously vital to an interpreter. And it's always a pleasure to work with speakers and conference organizers who understand that it's in everybody's best interests to provide the interpreter with as much information as possible. But there's really nothing better than working with a good partner, a fellow interpreter who can scribble notes clarifying terms I either don't know or can't remember in the flurry of the moment. A good sidekick is like a mobile assistance unit, the St. Bernard I welcome with open arms if I am ever in trouble up there on those slippery slopes.

An interpreter usually works alone, in a courtroom, an attorney's office, a hospital, and

so on. But some conference-interpreting assignments bring together a group of interpreters to create an experience that is a combination intensive workshop, on-the-job training, and therapy session. I am thinking of a recent conference held at an idyllic retreat in the Hill Country west of Austin. A team of interpreters worked steadily for three days, and in between meetings and presentations we talked shop for hours, exchanged war stories and, in my case at least, learned a great deal from each other. Unwinding is important after a day at the microphone: just as a good translator is also a writer, a good interpreter is also a performer, and we have to do something with all that energy when the show is over.

Perhaps it's the performance aspect of interpreting that keeps me coming back. The challenge of having to show my stuff in public, without much of a net. I like the way it makes me want to do better next time. Yes, that's it: BNT, "Better Next Time." We can invent acronyms too, can't we? ★