

VISSON, Lynn (1991) : *From Russian into English. An Introduction to Simultaneous Interpretation*, Ann Arbor (Michigan), Ardis Publishers, 266 p.

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■ VISSON, Lynn (1991): *From Russian into English. An Introduction to Simultaneous Interpretation*, Ann Arbor (Michigan), Ardis Publishers, 266 p.

This study of simultaneous interpretation from Russian into English is intended primarily for trainee Russian-into-English interpreters and advanced students of Russian. It is divided into two distinct parts. The first provides a comprehensive description of the various facets of interpreting practice. The second contains teaching material — selected practice texts and vocabulary lists.

Lynn Visson takes advantage of the introduction to make some sound points about interpretation and to clear up certain misunderstandings. She stresses the vital importance of interpretation in international relations, which is in stark contrast to the depressing picture she paints of the low status of interpreting in the United States — and the often disastrous results of such an attitude. The author demonstrates that language skills are not sufficient qualification for interpretation and makes a useful distinction between “bilinguals” and interpreters. Contrary to a widespread misconception, the two categories do not overlap — interpretation requires specific skills.

Another very welcome point made in the introduction is the importance of working whenever possible into one’s native language. This has been stressed repeatedly and forcefully by many interpreters and teachers of interpreting, but needs reiterating, as some interpreting courses still emphasise the teaching of simultaneous into the second language. As Lynn Visson notes, although the interpreter may master set phrases and *clichés* when working into a foreign language, he will not achieve “the stylistic levels, nuances and subtleties possible when working into the native language”.

Other statements are more debatable, for instance that consecutive interpretation is “extremely time-consuming” and allows for “more possibilities for omissions and errors” than does simultaneous. The experience of many interpreters who work regularly in consecutive would tend to belie both criticisms. The advocating of one or other of these forms of interpreting is probably more a matter of specific circumstance than of superiority in absolute terms.

The theoretical context is not always sufficiently clear. The use of the term “code-switching” to describe the transfer of a message from target to source language is confusing as it would seem to suggest an emphasis on the conversion of signs. This is belied by points the author makes about the relative, context-dependent nature of words

when used to “express thoughts and ideas”. Another example is the possible misrepresentation of Lederer’s views on interpretation. The author gives the impression that Lederer considers all simultaneous interpreting as “an unnatural exercise”, making “intelligent people repeat words which are meaningless to them”, whereas the comment refers to the initial views held about interpreting, not interpreting itself.

The “Practical Problems” (Part One) make for easy and informative reading. A broad range of topics are presented with straightforward advice about how to solve the difficulties encountered. Numerous examples in Russian with suggested English translations are provided. Whereas the second part is clearly aimed at students, the first could be of relevance to a wider readership with an interest in interpreting in general. For such readers, it would have been helpful to have had an English translation of the Russian quotations in a footnote.

Some chapters in this first section relate to practical problems of interpretation in general and experienced interpreters will often find echoed here their personal impressions and past experience — the chapter on interpreting figures, for example, where the author, after describing the difficulties, stresses that the goal must be to “listen intelligently using semantic context whenever possible”. The chapter on political terminology opens up the debate of the nature of political vocabulary and raises the question of the effect of current changes in Eastern Europe on the use of political *clichés*. The chapter on style is also thought-provoking, covering appropriate rendering of stylistic level and raising the thorny issue of how to approach proverbs and sayings. Should they be translated transparently or should the listener be informed of the original expression? These chapters also contain several apt, and often amusing descriptions of interpreting practice, such as the account of modern conference rooms with the interpreters perched high above the meeting room with “an excellent view of the backs of delegates’ heads but little contact with the listeners”.

Other chapters are specific to Russian into English translation, covering the use of negatives in Russian, intonation, etc. These are language rather than interpretation problems as such, although the points raised and advice provided will undoubtedly be helpful to student interpreters. However, the danger in dealing with problems specific to the translation of Russian and those of general relevance to interpretation, whatever the language, in the same section is a tendency to over-emphasise the translation of words and expressions, in the comparative stylistics trend.

The second, shorter part contains several selected practice texts in Russian, suitable for the teaching of simultaneous interpretation. These are followed by selected lists of vocabulary likely to occur in conferences and presented under various headings, such as education, economics and business, films, etc. These mini-glossaries could prove useful for students embarking on an interpretation course, to be used as an initial core to be gradually supplemented.

Lynn Visson repeatedly stresses the importance of “converting” the message to make it readily understandable to an English-speaking audience. It is the ideas that must be translated. Words are mere “building blocks for the expression of thoughts and ideas”. The advice about adapting the form of the message to the new listeners, with a view to “not literal, but semantic or conceptual fidelity” is sound. However, the English translations provided to illustrate these points are, unfortunately, at times rather opaque and “Russian-sounding”. This is perhaps due to the fact that the passages used are presented in isolation and thus come across as examples of Russian as a language rather than ideas set in a context.

As the chapter headings indicate, the emphasis throughout is on practical problems and how to solve them. What is perhaps lacking is a general principle — that the interpreter must understand the whole message perfectly (and in so doing probably forget its component parts) to re-express it clearly and naturally in the target language. After all, it is this conviction that gives the student interpreter the confidence to break away from artificial language constraints and rely on his skills of comprehension and expression.

However, despite this, *From Russian into English. An Introduction to Simultaneous Interpretation* provides a stimulating account of interpretation and contains a wealth of helpful advice for students and novice interpreters.

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