The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Quality Interpreters Becoming Scarce

By Lena Smirnova

September 27, 2012



From left, Tsybenko, Sukhodryev and Pavel Palazhchenko, interpreters for Putin, Khrushchev and Gorbachev. **Lena Smirnova**

On a hot September day, 12 years ago, Andrei Tsybenko was ushered into a stuffy back room at the CNN studio in New York.

He had stayed up working past midnight the day before, and now the task before him, as he tried to orient himself among the mess of wires on the floor, was to introduce the English-speaking world to Russia's new ruler.

For the next 60 minutes, Tsybenko was the English voice of Vladimir Putin as the new president answered Larry King's questions about his KGB career and the sinking of the Kursk submarine.

"He was forced to answer and I had to, for the whole world, talk precisely about very slippery topics," Tsybenko said Wednesday at a Kremlin event for International Translation Day, to occur Sunday.

"It was necessary to show the whole world that a new leader had arrived, and it was necessary to explain who Mr. Putin was," he added.

Having served as a presidential interpreter under Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, Tsybenko recently left the job in favor of an advisory post at the Russian Embassy in Madagascar. His departure leaves behind questions about the succession of skilled political interpreters.

University officials say incoming linguistic students do not have the same skill set as previous generations, even though simultaneous interpreters in Moscow can make 15,000 to 30,000 rubles ($500 to $1,000) a day.

Though more people now know a foreign language, translators who can handle synchronized, high-profile work are becoming few and far between, experts said.

Viktor Sukhodrev, who translated for Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, recalled staying up nights and working chaotic hours while accompanying the Soviet leaders on international visits.

Sukhodrev said he needed to interpret their improvised speeches in a fraction of a second. Khrushchev's rhetoric was particularly hard to communicate to the English audience.

"Khrushchev didn't dig into his pocket for words," Sukhodrev said.

He tagged along on Khrushchev's visit to the United States in 1959. The general secretary's speeches were all written in advance, but he usually did not read past the first paragraphs.

"This was probably the most difficult of all the tasks in my career, a daily responsibility to translate unprepared, improvised lines and speeches, sprinkled with an abundance of proverbs and folky words," Sukhodrev said.

Whether the new generation of translators would be up to such a challenge is in doubt.

Teimuraz Ramishvili, director of the Foreign Ministry's linguistics department, said current students do not even have a grasp of their native language.

Instead of the clean language used in literature, today's students use a jargon filled with trendy signs, symbols and nicknames, he said.

Dmitry Yermolovich, a professor at the Moscow State Linguistic University, said he has had to review Russian grammar with fifth-year students. He said students read very little.

"Beginning in childhood, they need to have a thirst for reading, and they need to have read a basic set of books considered national heritage," he said.

He specified that future translators need to have read at least 50 tomes of children's classics and 200 tomes of world literature.

Thorough knowledge of various disciplines is also beneficial, he said, since the translator may be called on to talk about very specialized fields.

Tsybenko said he had to recall all the phrasings he learned as a military translator to get

through the "Larry King Live" interview with its detailed questions about submarine parts.

A new trend is for specialists from different industries to get language degrees on the side. But widespread knowledge of foreign languages does not diminish the need for professional translators, Yermolovich said.

Businesspeople who know a foreign language often depend on translators for synchronized interpreting during important meetings or for translating technical documents, he said.

Yelena Yushina, a lecturer at the Moscow State Linguistic University, instructs up-and-coming interpreters but also gets a fair share of homemakers who just want to learn a new language.

"While in the past it was popular for homemakers to embroider, now they get the profession of an interpreter," she said, adding that few linguistics students actually go on to work as professional interpreters.

Only 5 percent of the graduates of the Moscow State Linguistic University become simultaneous interpreters, she said. Instead, most become assistants at multinational firms or real estate agencies. Some travel abroad to work as nannies.

Qualified teachers are leaving the profession as well. Medium salaries at the prestigious Moscow State Linguistic University range from 9,000 rubles ($300) to 13,000 rubles per month, Yushina said.

"The school of professors that could have prepared such workers has scattered," she said. "It is scattered because of low salaries that don't let us work to our full capacity or to work at all."

For Sukhodrev, one of the main motivators for getting into the profession was the ability to travel abroad, which was strictly restricted in Soviet times.

Tsybenko had an ambition to work with the leaders of his generation.

"To me, these people really are heroes — and it's always nice to work for people that you consider heroes," he said. "I thank fate for letting me work with these people."

Related articles:

- The Art of Diplomatic Translation
- Bureaucrats to Learn English

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/09/27/quality-interpreters-becoming-scarce-a18143