

In the last issue of *Word Power*, the veil over the mystical Voice was finally lifted. Now you know that the Simultaneous Interpretation Section of the OLA is responsible for providing simultaneous interpretation to the two tiers of representative government, all government bureaux and departments and certain statutory bodies. What do the interpreters do? What makes them tick? Let's find out straight from the horse's mouth.

## The Invisible Link (Part II)



The Simultaneous Interpretation Section (SI Section) works primarily in English and Cantonese. In anticipation of the growing use of Putonghua in the run-up to the Handover and beyond, a Putonghua Pool was set up within the Section over 10 years ago. To join the Pool, serving interpreters must sit and pass a Putonghua SI test. At present, 9 out of the 15 full-time interpreters of the Section are members of the Pool. And for the statistics buff, of the 1 700 or so meetings the interpreters serve in a year, 95% of them require Cantonese and English SI and the remaining 5% involve Putonghua SI.

On a typical day, an interpreter spends half a day at the office, preparing for assignments and attending to other Section duties, and the other half trotting to various venues to perform SI. When assignments are bunched up, interpreters may have to do double assignments on a day, playing social workers in one assignment and computer engineers in the next.

Interpretation is perceived to be an arduous and mentally-draining task. And it is. As messages stream through speeches of all styles and accents and at any speed, time is never on the side of the interpreter. All at once, the interpreter has to process the original message in a source language, decipher it and put it across in the target language while trying to catch the next message coming through. As for the subject under discussion, it could be anything under the sun and more often than not, it is technical and specialised. In one meeting, a gynaecologist may be explaining the medical significance of a certain clinical procedure and in another, an engineer may enthuse over the latest vehicle emission technology which promises to relegate smoky vehicles to a thing of the past. And of course, with Hong Kong being a leading trade and financial centre, meetings on global trade issues and the financial market are regular fare.

How do interpreters rise to the challenge? What qualities do they possess? Myth has it that interpreters possess supernatural power. Of course, nothing could be farther removed from the truth. While linguistic prowess, intelligence and unflappability are the essential ingredients in the making of an interpreter, diligence, perseverance and an insatiable appetite for knowledge are what would make an interpreter excel in his/her work.

Interpreters have to maintain a high level of preparedness at all times to cater to emergency assignments and the random nature by which diverse subjects are brought up in a meeting. They study relevant papers and background materials and compile glossaries to prepare for specific assignments. They must also keep themselves abreast of current affairs and actively mount self-enhancement efforts to brush up their languages and general knowledge. For though interpreters always work in teams of at least two, interpretation is still very much a solo show. When the chips are down, it is one's skills and knowledge that carry one through. There is simply no room for complacency for any interpreters who take pride in their profession.

In a nutshell, an interpreter's life is hectic and nerve-wrecking but it is also fun and highly rewarding. It is not some people's idea of a regular job but the beauty of it is that it forces one to reach deep down and come up with one's very best. And along the way, life is never, never dull. So if being the best that one can be and getting richly rewarded for it is your idea of a good way to live your life, there are still vacancies in the Section for those who aspire to become full-time interpreters or those who prefer to do interpretation on the side.