

**Discours prononcé par Miriam Shlesinger,
lauréate du Prix Danica Seleskovitch 2009,
à l'occasion de la remise du Prix le 20 mars 2010 à l'ESIT (Paris)**

Dear friends and colleagues

Please permit me to begin by expressing my deepest appreciation to the *Association pour le Prix Danica Seleskovitch* and to all those who played a role in deciding to name me the recipient of the Danica Seleskovitch award for 2009. This singular tribute came as an overwhelming surprise, all the more so when I recalled those who had received it in the past – each of them a giant in the history of our profession. Words fail me in trying to describe how humbled I am, and how grateful to the Association for seeing fit to confer on me an award that bears the name of one of the most illustrious figures in the history of the interpreting profession and a celebrated trailblazer of the Interpreting Studies community as well.

I did not have the privilege of meeting the late Prof. Seleskovitch, but of course, much of what I am today, particularly as a teacher and as a researcher, may be traced back to her unparalleled contribution to our field. She is quoted in just about every article I have ever written, and I turn to her writings – and to those she co-authored with Prof. Lederer – as a source of knowledge and inspiration. Nor have I ever had the privilege of visiting ESIT before. The fact that the prize ceremony is taking place in this historic setting, steeped as it is in the history of our profession, fills me with a sense of reverence.

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Interpreting, and Interpreting Studies, are at the very core of my being – of who I am and of what I do. I first began studying interpreting in 1973, at Bar Ilan University, where I now teach, and shortly after graduation, I joined my colleagues in the Hebrew booth. There wasn't much work in those days, and it took quite a few years to build up the 200 days that were needed, but as soon as I had done so, I joined AIIC and felt that I had become a full-fledged member of the interpreting profession.

Scarcely a day goes by when I do not reflect on how grateful I am for my career in interpreting – a career that I have never taken for granted. On the strictly professional level, it has included countless conferences, symposia, panels and workshops of every description, depositions and trials (including three war-crimes trials), numerous diplomatic assignments and summit meetings and peace conferences, interpreting for national and international media, as well as the usual array of commercial and esoteric assignments that every interpreter encounters now and again. Work in interpreting in Israel (as in many places) is very eclectic – and that is indeed the beauty of our profession: how can one become bored when one is exposed to such a rich array of topics, settings, speakers and materials.

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I have also had the good fortune of teaching interpreting for the past 32 years – and what greater gratification could there be than handing down one's professional expertise to the "successor generation"?

Interpreting, as a career, and as a miracle of human performance, offers boundless opportunities to the researcher as well, and I was greedy enough – and curious enough – to want to explore as many of these as possible. My master's thesis (22 years ago) centered on the style of the interpreter's output, in an attempt – based on actual conference recordings – to understand how the very process of interpreting affects the product, in terms of both style and coherence. My doctoral dissertation was more psycholinguistic – focusing on the singularity of practitioners' working memory and on the ways in which they retain long strings of source-language input while interpreting between two very different languages. This research lay at the interface between cognitive psychology and interpreting studies, and made me painfully aware of the trickiness of analyzing what goes on in the proverbial "black box".

But both before and after embarking on my own Via Doctorosa I also discovered a cornucopia of topics waiting to be explored, all of them related to interpreting in its different modes and modalities and settings. Among other things, I have tried to investigate

- the norms that obtain for interpreting
- the impact of interpreters' intonation
- the manner in which interpreting affects textual cohesion
- the self-representation of interpreters as professionals
- the strategies we use in order to keep up
- the effects of presentation rate
- the criteria of quality in interpreting
- the nature of "interpretese"
- the effects of different teaching methods
- the pros and cons of remote interpreting
- the workings of court interpreting
- attitudes towards healthcare interpreting
- ethical dilemmas faced by community interpreters (about which I will say more in a moment).
- And, I might add, as a member of the AIIC Research Committee – headed by Barbara Moser-Mercer, and previously by Jennifer Mackintosh, I have had

the privilege of participating in the planning of the Workload Study and in the Lifespan Study that is currently under way, with its focus on the life and career of individual interpreters.

In all of this I have had the support and inspiration of several role models (younger than me in age, but older in professional experience) – pioneers who paved the way for researchers like myself, and helped to create a comfortable space, in which research into the process and product of interpreting would be viewed as a bona fide domain of scientific exploration. I hesitate to mention names since no list can be inclusive, but I cannot but pay tribute to the remarkable pioneers with whom I have had the privilege of working extensively and personally, in various capacities, over the years: Daniel Gile, Barbara Moser-Mercer, Robin Setton and Franz Pöchhacker. Without their work to inspire me, I would not be here today.

I sometimes enjoy telling people (and this is the truth) that I came to Israel to study medicine, so I studied musicology, and that's why I'm a translator (and interpreter). With this bio-sketch, I try to convey that I became what I was destined to become. I cannot imagine a life more rewarding, more varied, more enlightening, more stimulating, more satisfying than that of a translator-interpreter who practices her profession while also imparting it as a teacher and observing it as a researcher.

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My other preoccupation over the years has been with human rights, including language rights – every individual's right to have his or her day in court, to be protected against arbitrary arrest, or against unwarranted violation of his or her freedom. In short, the right to understand and to be understood. For a while, particularly during the four years when I was head of the Israel section of Amnesty International, these concerns were channeled into letter-writing campaigns, lobbies, protests, rallies etc. But then it struck me: my professional life and my "political" life could converge; the world of interpreting too has much to offer to the advancement of human rights. For what is interpreting if not the removal of barriers, and what is **community interpreting** if not a means of reducing disparities and of ensuring that those who do not speak the official language(s) may be on an equal footing with those who do. No wonder that the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950) includes the requirement to provide interpreting in all legal cases, as a means of guaranteeing a fair trial.

The fact that my discovery of community interpreting came only many years after I'd become a conference interpreter is of course bound up with the way this part of the interpreting profession developed. Notwithstanding its enormous social importance, community interpreting did not come into its own until the mid-nineties. (In a few places, it happened earlier, but these were the rare exceptions.) Community (or community-based) interpreting – also referred to as dialogue interpreting or liaison interpreting or public service interpreting – is still all too often the domain of children or other relatives, of bilingual neighbors, of hospital cleaners, of passersby, of the patient in the next bed, or of anyone who has, or claims to have, a knowledge of two languages. It involves the interaction between a service provider and a client,

and is usually conducted within public or private institutions in health, legal, social service and educational settings. Most of the work of signed language interpreters is in fact community interpreting too, even if it is not always defined in this way.

The truth be told, community interpreting is *still* not recognized as a profession in its own right in most countries around the world. And so, although it is, in effect, the oldest form of language mediation, and although there is a crying need for it in our ever-more-global village, it continues to lag behind; more often than not, it is perceived as something that any bilingual can do – and certainly not something that ought to be paid for. Practitioners are expected to work on their own, bi-directionally, in difficult physical conditions, in stressful situations, for service providers who do not necessarily grasp the complexities of the task. Their role boundaries are fluid, and all too often, they are asked to perform physical or administrative jobs that have nothing to do with their skills as bilingual or multilingual professionals. They are frequently confronted with ethical dilemmas, and with the psychological stress that comes from handling exceptionally sensitive interactions. Their remuneration, if any, is very modest. Thus, for example, in describing his work as interpreter at a Centre for Illegal Immigrants in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Guillermo Montesdeoca had this to say: "For an interpreter to be hired at a Centre for Illegal Immigrants, s/he first must be unemployed, and must be able to prove this. An interpreter is paid as a secondary school graduate, even though all of us are university graduates in Translation and Interpreting."

Given its lower status and its ill-defined parameters, I find it all the more moving, and exciting, that community interpreting figures in the discourse of AIIC – the bastion of the interpreting profession at its finest and loftiest and most professional – as seen in its frequent mention in *Communicate!*, and that the *Association pour le Prix Danica Seleskovitch* has seen fit to recognize the relevance of community interpreting by citing my work in research related to this area as one of the reasons for granting me this award.

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In 1999, sensing that community interpreting was something that I would really like to become involved in, I attended a three-day conference in Vienna organized by the European Babelea Association for Community Interpreting. The conference was attended by representatives of government agencies, local authorities, hospitals and refugee groups. This was the first time I heard about the remarkable potential of my profession to help people whose distress is compounded by language issues. Two years later I attended the Critical Link conference in Montreal, and was further inspired to try to import the concept into Israel, a country with a large indigenous minority as well as sizable immigrant communities. Ultimately, this led me to organize a large conference titled: *Mind the Language Gap – Access to Health Care for Language Minorities* and to start knocking on doors at the Health Ministry, the Immigration Ministry, the police, the courts, the mental health system and beyond. The process has been slow, and riddled with frustrating encounters with officials, doctors and administrators who explain to me how well they manage without an

interpreter. Still, the process has led to a gradual acknowledgement, by some, at least, that they do not really "manage". Nor does the minority language speaker manage – the immigrant from Leningrad or Addis Abeba trying to find out how to claim a disability pension, the Palestinian patient trying to understand the doctor's instructions, the refugee from Darfour trying to fill out the forms that will entitle him to asylum (at least for a while), the Thai farm worker who has had an accident and arrives at the hospital but speaks no language other than Thai, or the Deaf mother who wants to consult with her child's teacher.

What does any of this have to do with conference interpreting? Well, nothing and everything.

Nothing, in the sense that the aims, the purposes, the settings, the working conditions and – not least – the typical language combinations are not, and cannot be, the same.

Everything, in the sense that both types of practice are about helping people communicate, about making sure that the message gets across.

Nothing, in the sense that conference interpreting enjoys high status and prestige (some would say that this status is on the decline and is threatened by a myriad of factors, but it is still an unmistakable trademark of our profession).

Everything, in the sense that both types of practitioners are keen to learn, to improve, to inform their clients of ways in which the service can be made more effective. Both types of practitioners are avid learners, if only they are given the opportunity to learn.

We of the conference interpreting profession – in all its settings and manifestations – face numerous challenges, mostly related to the processing limitations of the human brain. While processing limitations apply to the community interpreter too, of course, her primary challenge lies elsewhere – in finding the middle ground between neutrality and advocacy, between detachment and involvement. The challenge becomes all the more formidable when she sees her disempowered minority-language client unable to initiate questions of clarification or when she is forced to decide whether to assume a more active stance.

We of the conference interpreting profession enjoy status and prestige, and are duly rewarded for our efforts. Community interpreters in some places – chief among them Australia and the Nordic countries – enjoy status and prestige as well, or at least the status and prestige that comes with being recognized as indispensable. In most places, unfortunately, such status and prestige have been slow in developing. In many instances, in fact, community interpreters have yet to be seen as an essential part of what every multi-ethnic, multilingual, multicultural society – and this describes practically every society in today's Europe, and beyond – provides for its minority language speakers, in health care and vital social services.

I myself rarely have the privilege of serving as a community interpreter, since I do not speak any of the minority languages needed in my country. Instead, I have focused on training those who do – Arabic speakers, Amharic speakers and Russian speakers – and on conducting or supervising relevant research. The training efforts have included the process of setting up two telephone interpreting services – one, for Amharic, run by an NGO and serving about 70 outpatient clinics; and one for Russian and Arabic, run by an HMO and serving about 50 clinics. My obsession with community interpreting has also included the creation of our first-ever academic program for the training of sign language interpreters, and the launching of a program (now in its fourth year) for university students who speak a minority language and who are willing to participate in a year-long course in which they also devote one hundred hours of their time (four hours a week) to volunteering as community interpreters.

Role boundaries and descriptions are perhaps the foremost theme in the community interpreting research literature and in my course. To give you a sense of the subtleties of this under-defined occupation, I would like to share with you some excerpts from reports that these students have written over the years. Not surprisingly, these reports have generated lively classroom discussions and debates, mostly centering on the subtle balance between the more passive and the more active approaches.

Take the case of Dina, an Amharic speaker, volunteering at a well-baby clinic, who found herself acting as a culture broker and advocate:

The nurse said to come back in a month, and the mothers didn't come, so the nurse was annoyed at them. I explained to her that some immigrants from Ethiopia don't have the concept of "month". I suggested that she should tell the mothers to count **four Sabbaths** and then come back. It worked.

Or the emotional burden described by another student-interpreter, Nadja, a Russian speaker, volunteering at the municipal welfare department, mediating in an emotionally trying exchange:

A woman had looked after children for 7 years and the employer fired her. She kept crying and it was really hard to interpret and to hear what she was going through. It's very difficult psychologically to deal with the way people are being shoved around.

And what would we do if we were Lisa, a Spanish speaker, volunteering at a well-baby clinic, and struggling with issues of trust and confidentiality:

This Filipino couple brought their baby to the doctor. It turns out they always put gloves on their babies' hands. The doctor said to stop, because it interferes with the baby's development. I interpreted this. The father told me to tell the doctor that they wouldn't do it anymore but then he told his wife that when they got home they could do whatever they wanted, and that the

doctor had no right to tell them what to do. I didn't know if I should interpret this or not.

And was it appropriate for Niv an English speaker, volunteering at a well-baby clinic, to assume the role of support worker:

[...] The nurse asked the mother to be tested for HIV, and the mother started crying. The nurse asked me to explain to her that it was a standard procedure, and that she shouldn't be worried or offended, so I took her aside, and explained it until she calmed down. Maybe this isn't something I should be doing as an interpreter, but I felt it was the right way, especially since nobody else could have done it.

How many of us, in our conference interpreting careers, have ever faced the kind of dilemma confronted by Mark, a Russian speaker, volunteering at the Ministry of Interior, as he wrestled with having to lie in order not to deviate from the boundaries of his role:

This woman kept asking me what she should write in the form to improve her chances of getting a visa. I know what kinds of answers people should give, but I told her I had no idea and she should just write the truth.

In a more positive vein, he added:

My being there, even if it was only four hours a week, made things faster, calmer, friendlier and more pleasant. My parents are reluctant to go to the different offices and sometimes they just don't go, because they know they won't get help in Russian. Having an interpreter there is a good idea, although having a Russian-speaking clerk would be even better.

But along with all the dilemmas there is a sense of gratification, that comes with knowing that they have made a real difference. As in the case of Tahani, an Arabic speaker, volunteering at a pediatric ward:

This was the first time they [a group of young Palestinian mothers] had been able to learn the basics of first aid, because there had never been an interpreter before. Imagine how good it felt for me to know that if their baby was in danger, they would know what to do, thanks to what I had done during this workshop.

In another report, Tahani wrote:

The course gave me self-confidence and the courage to speak up and to say out loud: We exist, and in order to communicate with us, we need both languages. The course made me feel I belong, and the people in the ward strengthened my faith in peace and co-existence. All we need is an open heart and a helping hand, and the desire to change things. To my people, the work I did was like oxygen.

Is it the role of a university to contribute to a better world? Not everyone thinks so, but I do. The course has allowed the students to leverage their two languages for the benefit of their respective communities, and has allowed me to make the most of the academic infrastructure, on the one hand, and of the resources provided by the students, on the other. How many of these students will become community interpreters in the long run is anyone's guess. But I think I can safely say that they will have a far better grasp of the role of language mediation in combating inequality.

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How about us? How about the current links between the conference interpreting profession and the community interpreting profession-in-the-making? Can there be an effective and natural connection between the unequivocally professional parts of the interpreting world, on the one hand, and the under-recognized, under-paid, under-trained world of community interpreting, on the other? I think there can, since - to misquote Terentius - "We are interpreters, and nothing related to interpreting is strange to us".

This is not to say that community interpreting and conference interpreting will ever converge. They are two very different forms of professional practice. Community interpreting as a profession is not - and cannot be - the twin sister of conference interpreting, but it can be our younger sister, whom we encourage to turn to us for advice and support. Associations of community interpreters are not likely to become duplicates of AIIC, but we can put our knowledge, experience and professional expertise at their disposal. True, the prospects of an international association of community interpreters at this stage seem rather slim, but as the profession of community interpreting asserts itself and gains both status and stability, AIIC may serve as its role model. The details will be different - community interpreting requires a different set of standards and entails different types of ethical dilemmas, but the organization of community interpreters, on whatever scale, may want to take its lead from AIIC as an organization that promotes principles of best practice, supports efforts to provide additional training, upholds a code of ethical conduct, negotiates with institutional employers, insists on reasonable working conditions and promotes relevant research.

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Ultimately, acknowledgment of the role of community interpreting in our society is a political process, which reflects a society's view of communication as a basic need, and recognizes the securing of human rights (for members of indigenous minorities, for immigrants, for the Deaf and hard of hearing) as a fundamental part of every society's political agenda. In order for this branch of our profession to come into its own, there must be a sea change in the way societies look at language rights, at the

status of minorities, at the importance of language in overcoming disparities, at the value of equal access to services; in short, there must be a re-assessment of national and international priorities on the social and political levels. Clearly, this goes beyond our mandate as a professional organization of conference interpreters, but we can certainly support it from the sidelines.

To quote Luigi Lucarelli, writing in *Communicate!*: "If communication is of the essence, then community interpreting is of the highest importance. All of us in the community of interpreters should promote its advancement and professionalization."

And so, on a day like this, when I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not just dreaming – I think we do have a role to play, as professionals and primarily as concerned citizens of the world – to insist that nobody who genuinely needs an interpreter in order to secure his or her basic rights is deprived of this service. Let this be part of our personal, professional and institutional agenda.

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In closing, I would like to cite a verse from the writings of the Jewish Sages. In the tractate known as the Ethics of the Fathers, we read: "You are not obliged to complete the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself of it." So it is with the study and practice of interpreting for the benefit of society at large: we are not obliged, either as individuals or as a professional organization, to do all that needs to be done to ensure that the task has been completed, but neither are we free to absolve ourselves of it. By deciding to take notice of community interpreting, this uniquely prestigious organization of conference interpreters – to which I am proud to belong – has played a meaningful role, tangibly as well as symbolically, in harnessing the profession of interpreting in service of a better world.

Coming from a part of the globe where communication, understanding and reconciliation are at an all-time low, and where barriers to communication seem to be mounting by the hour – I cannot but hope that our profession will indeed play a meaningful role – as it has done so many times in the past, by fostering dialogue, clearing up misunderstandings, building trust, and giving us yet another reason to take pride in what we do and who we are.

I'd like to end by thanking the student interpreters for bearing with me. I hope I have not made their lives too difficult.

Thank you again from the bottom of my heart for the extraordinary privilege of being here with you.

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