**SOME HISTORY AND UNDERSTANDING OF UN VERBATIM REPORTING**

The work of the Verbatim Reporting Service is often misunderstood – by users, by our language colleagues throughout the Organization, by delegations of Member States and even by many in the Management. When asked about Verbatim Reporting, the first thing that comes to mind of an American or a British is probably a court reporter using either machine or pen shorthand, recording *verbatim* or word-by-word everything said in the court house.

For one thing, when our Service was established in 1946 and when the first verbatim record had been issued after the conclusion of the first plenary meeting of the General Assembly held on 10 January 1946, THAT was indeed the case. For another, during the last three or four decades, Verbatim Records are no longer transcriptions of the original statements or interpretations of these statements. Nowadays a Verbatim Record is the product of speech translation, multilingual editing and extensive research, in addition to transcriptions of statements made in one of the six UN official languages.

**OUR END PRODUCT**

The Verbatim Reporting Service produces de facto official meetings records of the plenary meetings of the Security Council, the General Assembly, the First Committee, the Disarmament Commission and some other bodies in all SIX UN official languages, *exclusively* at Headquarters. The end-users of this Service are the Permanent Missions to the United Nations, Foreign ministries of Member States, Secretariat Departments and Offices, academic institutions and media. According to a poll conducted by the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library, Verbatim Records have been the *most sought* after UN documents in the UN Depository Libraries, which exist in over 134 countries around the world.

Verbatim Records as official meeting records are meant to answer the following questions: “Who spoke at the meeting?”, “What exactly was said word by word?” and “What was the final decision?” And I stress again: these meeting records are prepared *verbatim* or word by word of what was said at the meeting. This is what distinguishes Verbatim Records from Summary Records which are prepared summaries that capture substantive points made by each speaker.
OUR TASK

While Verbatim Reporters are at times still aided by digital recordings to transcribe statements pronounced in the mother tongue, they function as a combination of speech translators, multilingual editors and database researchers. With all due respect for the interpreters, as a result of time pressure in the United Nations intergovernmental bodies, speeches are being delivered at a far faster pace than recommended, resulting in a variety of difficulties, including gaps and errors in interpretation. In many cases, the full content of a speech is not captured. This is particularly true for certain language pairs, for example Arabic into English, and in the interpretation of some highly technical statements in the General Assembly – discussion of the reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Law of the Sea and some other very specific agenda items.

WHAT IS A UN VERBATIM REPORTER/REVISER?

*Speech translation:* Over 80 per cent of Verbatim Reporters’ work involves translation of speeches made in other official languages into their mother tongue (target language). I would like to stress again that translating speeches is not the same as preparation of summary-records or translation of reports, resolutions and treaties and other documents done by the Translation Services.

A speech tends to be more expressive, and accurate translation must preserve this expression in the target language. We see it from recent heated discussions in the Security Council that often an irony, sarcasm or belligerence of a speech is its most essential meaning. Also of high importance is the preservation - for users today and to historians in the future - of the speaker’s rhetorical and political intent, which is often veiled. It is a general rule that thorny political situations lead to thorny language and syntax and we know for a fact that ambiguity of these situations is often the speaker’s goal. A Verbatim Reporter needs to be able to recognize when such speech is intentional and in this case the Verbatim Reporter needs to figure out how to preserve the thorniness in a format compatible with the idea of an official meetings record that will be read and perhaps quoted. This task becomes more complex when the Reporter is dealing with speeches in other languages and the thorniness must be preserved through careful
translation. Therefore, it is an established practice for the Verbatim Reporting Service to have Reporters present at some meetings, in particular in the Security Council, and not only check the printed statements against delivery but also to feel the sentiments, the climate at the meeting, in particular those among the Security Council members.

**Revision/editing:** A significant portion of the Verbatim Service work involves revision and editing, which imply among other things maintaining a uniformly high standard of style. First Verbatim Reporters and then Revisers correct grammatical errors, clarify the order of presentations, verify quotations and insert necessary references, and check facts, proper names, geographical names, and other details against the documentation of the body concerned and all available databases. In accordance with prescribed patterns for parliamentary procedures, they employ standardized formulas when dealing with procedural matters and the conduct of voting. Just like the interpreters, the Verbatim Reporters and Revisers must be thoroughly up to date on all matters discussed at meetings of intergovernmental bodies, which often requires extensive research in those different areas.

All the above would be impossible without *Database research*. Both Verbatim Reporters preparing the original text and those translating from it must ensure that terminology and references are correctly cited. This requires researching such matters in the official United Nations documents and other reference materials through computer databases and via Internet.

**TO SUM UP:** To do their job, Verbatim Reporters and Revisers must have:

- Sound command of two or more of the UN official languages in addition to their mother tongue;
- Impeccable writing style in their target language;
- Advanced computer skills and knowledge of the United Nations editorial style;
- Profound understanding of the international situation and of the issues on the agendas of the bodies they cover.
What else is required of Verbatim Reporters and Reviser?

In addition to the competencies listed above, of no less importance is ability to work fast and under constant pressure, which translates into an ability to work with unusual speed and handle unusually large volumes of work. This means that a Reporter must be capable of averaging around 2500 words a day. And when all of this work is translation – NOT TRANSCRIPTION! – as it is for Reporters in some Sections: for example in the Russian and Chinese Sections it is most of the time and for all Reporters some of the time, the average Reporter is working at least twice as fast as the average Translator.

We know from our experience that it takes quite awhile for translators and graduates from translation schools to adjust to the demands of the Verbatim Service. They tend to be trained to translate written rather than spoken material. Also, trying to do 2500 words a day is an overwhelming, if not impossible undertaking.

The number of staff in the Verbatim Reporting Service is very small when compared to the staffing level in Translation Service. Since the Security Council may call for a meeting after hours, on weekends and holidays, every one of us is constantly on call – 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year. At the same time, the staff in the Verbatim Reporting Service are extremely proud of their difficult and important job in preparing the official meetings records of historic United Nations meetings. As one of our colleagues once proudly said: “We write the history!!”
Their work represents the permanent, historic record – in written form – of all oral statements that were made at the meeting.