

# Creativity and Interpretation

Presented in Sydney in July 1994 by **Max Bourke**,  
B.Sc (Hons) B.A

I thank the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators for doing me the honour of inviting me to deliver this lecture

I regard it as a singular honour because although I only knew Jill Blewett slightly, I found her to be, and our many mutual friends reported her to be, a very fine, creative and energetic person. While we both shared an interest in francophony, that was not how we knew each other.

We met several times socially but I only really got to know Jill in the last years of her life, when she was the chair of the South Australian State Theatre Company and I was the General Manager of the Australia Council. Leading a fully professional theatre company that tried to do adventurous and creative work in a relatively small city was no easy task. Yet the South Australian company tackled hard work, through putting together one of the most exciting creative teams in the country and demonstrating to Adelaide and, by touring, to the rest of Australia that it was possible to create great theatre outside the Sydney and Melbourne axis.

Jill Blewett was a great contributor to the theatre, and her death caused such distress among her many friends that the immediate response was the establishment of the literary awards that bear her name. Each Adelaide Festival since they have been established I am reminded of her, and many friends I know test these awards out by silently asking "whether Jill would have approved". So far, I think I can say she would!

I stand before you as someone who admires and respects competent translating and interpreting and knows how hard the job is. Although I have studied a number of languages other than English, I only speak one fluently.

It was that competence, to a point, that got me into deep trouble.

**Max Bourke** was an agricultural scientist and ABC radio journalist who spent 23 years in senior Federal Government positions, including CEO of the Australian Heritage Commission, The Australia Council for the Arts and the Office of Multicultural Affairs. He left the public sector and established a farming-related business in 1996.

I have frequently acted as an amateur interpreter (and I know that goes against AUSIT approval) for francophones on largely social occasions, and even once or twice in official situations. But on one memorable occasion I found myself chairing an important international conference on the arts where the keynote speaker was French, with very limited English. The organisers had arranged simultaneous interpreting and just as the speaker stepped to the podium in front of 300 people, the interpreter in the booth developed a coughing spasm and could not go on. So for the next forty minutes, in front of the audience, I was forced to do consecutive interpreting... horrible! And utterly exhausting! My respect for the professional

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interpreters reached new heights as I suffered, literally, a headache at the end of it.

My other major contact with interpreters has been as a participant at many international conferences. Some of those experiences have been good, but some have been very bad (a small number). So it was with some pleasure I read your AUSIT Code of Ethics where it says "A member shall not attempt to render to a client services that require knowledge not possessed..."

Issues to do with multiculturalism both as a description of contemporary Australian society and as government policies have been much in the news recently. The Saulwick Poll at the end of May received wide coverage. Two major newspapers interpreted the same results in almost diametrically opposite ways so that I was reminded of that Tandberg cartoon of the late '80s, where a pollster standing at a front door asks the householder, "Are you against multiculturalism?" Answer: "Yes". Surveyor: "Do you know what it means?" Answer: "No".

Having read the Saulwick poll in some detail, I would summarise it as follows:

- A significant majority of Australians believe that Australia is a better place to live now than people from many countries live here.
- A majority, but not a large one, believe that migrants should live and behave like the majority of Australians do.
- A significant majority agree that if people from a particular ethnic background want to mix mainly with themselves they should not be criticised.
- The largest majority of all was for the self-perception that Australia is a tolerant society.

Overall, I find these results cause for optimism. The self-perception of tolerance is predictable: I guess everyone feels they are tolerant; but the others reflect those characteristics that one sees and hears on the streets.

One area that is suggested as central to the work of the Office of Multicultural Affairs by these results, concerns the implied perception that there is a way in which the majority of Australians behave, which is somehow seen as normative behaviour. This seems to me rather contradictory in a society as diverse as Australian society. It also implies that there is much to be done with such survey respondents to ensure that they understand that the contemporary Australian community lives and behaves in a diverse range of ways. But they are still Australians. I assert this strongly because I am aware from my own contacts,

and from research, how strongly the take-up of Australian citizenship is from the newer areas of migrant recruitment, compared to the older areas.

One of the core tenets of the national agenda for a multicultural Australia, which is still the basis of our public policy, is that the Commonwealth government acknowledges in the area of social justice "The right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth."

Obviously, therefore, the role and function of interpreters and translators in facilitating this process is fundamental. You have a pivotal role to play in ensuring all Australians understand each other both through your linguistic skills and through your knowledge of different cultures. It often seems to me that not sufficient acknowledgement is given to the crucial role that language plays, per se, as the central element of cultural expression itself. Too frequently, only the outward symbols, such as the arts or sport or the behaviour of people in what they eat or wear, are acknowledged as the so-called elements of cultural difference.

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*"we do not speak language,  
language speaks us"*

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I believe it is language that is the essential cultural difference. Whorf's great aphorism "we do not speak language, language speaks us" is one I am firmly convinced of. Indeed, I was recently putting forward my thesis that perhaps Australian English was the defining element of cultural identity that people seem to be struggling for as the year 2001 approaches. I know this sounds esoteric in some ways, but apart from sharing the same piece of geography and a commitment to the social and legal institutions of this country, I do not see how one can be too prescriptive about national identity. One of the charming features of Australians, in my view, is the rather irreverent approach to things like national identity.

Certainly, the French have realised the centrality of language: their hallowed institution, the Académie Française, is set up to defend their language and if I was French I would regard it as one of the most important institutions in French socio-political life. All languages, perhaps other than English, are under threat, so the defence of linguistic difference is important if you cherish diversity.

But flowing from this diversity, systems of communication which involve accurate and ethical translation are equally essential. There is no doubt that interpreting and translating services of quality and professional integrity are vital on both social justice and economic efficiency grounds in Australia.

In my first few months with the Office of Multicultural Affairs it has been abundantly clear that the issue of language is perhaps the key issue underpinning most social justice concerns. In fact, it is useful to remind ourselves that this has long been recognised:

The Galbally Report in 1978 said:

"While the teaching of English is and must remain our highest priority, there will always be a significant proportion of people in the community who do not speak English well, including the newly arrived, those too old for other reasons unable to learn English and those whose English is inadequate under stress."

By 1989 the National Agenda for Multicultural Australia said:

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"Effective communication is vital to the economic and social life of any society. It is particularly important in a nation of diverse cultural and linguistic heritages such as Australia."

But more recently, the access and equity evaluation report of 1992 said: "Despite the considerable changes over recent years, the evaluation research

found there were still a number of barriers in place which prevented non-English speaking background Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from receiving full access to and equity in government services. Of these, the greatest barrier was that posed by inadequate language services with all the implications this has for communication."

I must also add that it has been my experience over the last few months of visiting people in all states and territories to get a feel for the issues, that the problems of interpretation and communication loom large in any discussion of issues relevant to the Office of Multicultural Affairs. This has been the case whether it was with the National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau, which I recently attended, or the Alice Springs Migrant Resource Centre.

Dr. Andrew Theophanous, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, has been holding a series of consultations on the implementation of the Government's access and equity strategy, particularly in relation to a number of key programs, and the interpreter/language issues have again been significant.

So I have no doubt that the need for quality interpreter and translator services will feature high on any agenda of issues of significance to service delivery in multicultural Australia. Indeed, my office regards quality interpreting/translating as of such import that we have a senior officer participating on the steering committee of the evaluation of the Translation and Interpreting Service currently nearing completion. We aim to monitor very closely the outcomes of this evaluation.

I believe the Commonwealth supports the principle of a system of registering interpreters and translators. But I understand there are a number of practical obstacles to be overcome and I am assured that the Government is anxious to work with the various stakeholders to overcome them.

AUSIT has an important role to play in professionalising what for too long has not been adequately recognised as an area requiring professional precision and ethics. Many harrowing tales can be told of the results of the lack of precision

in the judicial and health systems that are literally life threatening, caused by the absence of fully skilled interpreters. Furthermore, there is evidence of the likelihood of increasing rather than decreasing demand for these services.

In the social welfare field, it is essential for government service deliverers to note that the non-English speaking population of Australia is ageing at a significantly faster rate than the general population. While the experience of different migrant groups will vary considerably, we do know that by 2001, the large migrant intake of the early post-war years will account for around 25% of those aged 60 and over. The phenomenon where people tend to lose languages other than their natural language as they age will be of great significance in aged service provision in future years, although it already is a concern.

Finally, I believe that our national interpreting and translating resources will in future be more valued as they are seen as an important economic "resource" which has been much under-utilised.

Certainly in the context of the productive diversity agenda of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, we do recognise this.

Within the context of multicultural marketing, I have been strongly reminded of the significance of good translating in the last few days. The multicultural marketing conference this week and the launch by the Minister, Senator Nick Bolkus, of three books this week have done so.

The very good publication by the NLLIA called ABC For Exporters - The Beginner's Cultural Guide stresses the role of interpreters and translators in an amusing way by quoting the Canberra Times article called: "Language Barrier still Beats the Ad Men":

"Not all the barriers to European trade have fallen with the creation of the single market. There was a problem with the Toyota MR2 in France. Pronounced in French, the name MR2 translates as 'shitty'. The cereal brand 'Buds' translates into Swedish as 'Burnt Farmers'. It should be obvious why 'Pschitt' (a French soft drink), 'Bum' crisps from Spain and 'Super Piss' (a Finnish de-icer) have not been launched in Britain."

In a world which requires not only sophisticated but culturally appropriate communication it was suggested that the role of the interpreter and the translator would be more important than ever before. This point was made by both the product managers at the conference and in the manual mentioned.

An important opening for your skills is occurring through the organisation which I managed until recently, the Australia Council.

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I am pleased to say that the Literature Board, in what I believe is a very creative decision, has decided that as from next year, translators are to be regarded as primary creative writers in their own right. This will allow translators to apply directly for assistance to undertake work, which must still focus on the translation of the works of living Australian writers. This new program will further encourage the publishing industry to look to non-English speaking markets both within and outside Australia for Australian writing. I believe further important changes in these policies are likely to be announced later this year.

But the point is that Australia has the potential to become a major platform for international interpretation services. Now, I know that is a point that many of you have been making for some time. But to the extent that we can demonstrate our skills in translation, and there is no better flagship for this than through creative writing, there will be an acknowledgement of Australian interpretation and translation skills, both by Australians and by those overseas buying these skills.

Because of Jill Blewett's close interest in writing, and the fact that there exists a literary prize to honour her memory, I thought this was an appropriate way to conclude this address with this connection. I thank you for the opportunity of honouring the name of Jill Blewett.