

## Interpreter

Interview by Melissa Hartman

### Michelle Keating

Chief, Interpretation Group

Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations

Michelle Keating has always lived a multilingual life. Growing up, she spoke English, French, and Spanish at home; at age eight, she moved with her family from California to France. She earned a degree in English from Université Paul-Valéry in Montpellier, France, and then a master's degree in translation and interpretation from the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California. Three years later, she began her career with the U.N.—a career now spanning 20 years and six countries, including Italy, where she is currently based.



#### When did you become interested in a career as an interpreter?

Even as a child I worked informally as an interpreter for many years; because I learned French before my mother did, I would interpret for her in different settings. But I didn't consider becoming a professional interpreter until I took a class in

comparative literature. That course triggered an interest in translation, which involves working with the written word. During my master's program, I decided that I preferred interpretation, which involves spoken language.

#### How did you come to your current position at the United Nations?

After completing my master's program, I worked for three years as a freelance interpreter in Southern California for the U.S. State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program. I provided interpretation services mainly to young African leaders who were coming to the U.S. to learn about U.S. laws, multi-ethnic society, and government.

My first job with the U.N. was on a peacekeeping operation in the former Yugoslavia, where I worked for a year and a half. Then I accepted assignments with the United Nations in different countries: Rwanda, Tanzania, the Netherlands, Cambodia, and now I'm in Italy.

#### What does your work at the Food and Agriculture Organization entail?

The Food and Agriculture Organization is part of the United Nations family and seeks to help to eradicate hunger; reduce rural poverty; make agriculture, forestry, and fisheries more productive and sustainable; increase the resilience of livelihoods from disaster; and enable inclusive and efficient agricultural food systems.

As Chief of the Interpretation Group, I manage our interpretation staff and hire freelance interpreters. We organize many conferences throughout the year where Member States will discuss in the six U.N. languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish) how to achieve those objectives. Our interpreters make this possible by allowing people to both listen and express themselves in a language they are comfortable in.

#### Besides language skills, what do you think a good interpreter needs?

You have to be interested in a variety of areas. Interpreters who work at the Food and Agriculture Organization, for example, need to know about agriculture, forestry, fisheries, economics, and development—a wide range of subject matter. Today they may be interpreting at a meeting about how to control desert locusts, and tomorrow they may be working in a meeting about family farming.

Subject matter expertise can be acquired on an as-needed basis for specific conferences, but you definitely need very broad general cultural knowledge. People who read *National Geographic*, for example, or *Scientific American*—those who are interested in a wide range of subjects—will do well as freelance interpreters.

People who specialize in one area would more likely work for a specific organization. For example, interpreters who work for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague will specialize in how chemical weapons work.

#### What did you find most challenging about being an interpreter when you started?

I think it was learning to manage the stress of not knowing what people are going to say. All new interpreters face that challenge, but as you gain more experience, you become more confident.

For many years, I had a routine where I read a daily, a weekly, and a monthly magazine in English, French, and Spanish, my three working languages. Now I go on the Internet and open three windows to read about what's happening in Ukraine, for example, or about Ebola in Africa, in my working languages. At this level I'm not looking for perfect equivalences between words; I'm looking to see how people are talking about these things in their native language.

### **So interpreting isn't necessarily word-for-word?**

No. It's always about the meaning of a sentence. You want to be complete, accurate, and precise in another language, but you're not necessarily going to use the same words.

### **It seems it would be really hard to hear someone's ideas and immediately express them in another language without having time to think about it.**

It's a skill you learn. Almost anybody can do it for a minute or two, but beyond that it requires training and practice. Many people learn it in a master's program, where you build up the stamina to listen to something and interpret it into another language while continuing to listen to what people are saying so you can interpret that.

This is why conference interpreters always work in teams, usually teams of two, and switch off every 30 minutes. You can't sustain that degree of concentration for more than that.

### **What do you find most challenging about this work?**

Before taking this post, I worked a lot in international criminal law. I worked for the International Criminal Court when I was in the Netherlands. In Cambodia, I worked with the United Nations Assistance for the Khmer Rouge Trials. When I was in Tanzania and Rwanda, I was working for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

Court hearings are particularly challenging. It's not only the legal argument, which is difficult in that

you have to understand all the legal concepts. What I found most challenging was the personal witness testimony of people who have endured war crimes, who have lost friends and family, who have experienced such tremendous loss. It's a great challenge and a great responsibility to find the exact words to convey the experience of someone who lost their children or their loved ones.

### **Language processing technology is advancing rapidly. Do you envision a day when interpretation could be done by a computer?**

Translation applications or online translation tools are adequate for the purposes that most people are using them for, which is to extract information. If you want to look at someone's Facebook page and you use some kind of translation application to do that, it's not a problem. But when you're dealing with legal matters, advertising, or literature, such applications are inadequate for the degree of nuance required. When you're dealing with creative ideas, I think human beings still have the edge and will continue to have the edge in the near future.

### **What advice would you offer to students who might be just starting to think about a career like this?**

Besides learning languages, you need to be very curious. When you work as an interpreter, you're going to be working with a team, so teamwork is important.

There are only about 3,000 interpreters in the world who are members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters, so they're a pretty rare commodity. Even so, it's important to be modest and know your limitations. I've been working as an interpreter for 20 years, but I wouldn't want to go work with the International Atomic Energy Agency, for example, without having had time to prepare. Knowing your strengths and also your limitations is important to being a good interpreter. ■

## **What interpreters do**

In contrast to translators, who work with written words, interpreters listen to messages spoken in one language and convey them in another language. In simultaneous interpretation, the interpreter typically sits in a soundproof booth, listening to speech through headphones in the source language and speaking it into a microphone in the target language. In consecutive interpretation, which usually takes place in small meetings or discussions, the speaker pauses every few minutes for the interpreter to render the message into the target language.

## **Where they work**

Many interpreters work for international agencies, such as the United Nations, NATO, and the European Commission. Others work in all levels of courts, for governments and multinational corporations, and in hospitals.

The work of freelance interpreters involves significant travel, as they may work at meetings all over the world.

## **Education required**

In addition to perfect command of their native language and high-level knowledge of at least one other, interpreters typically have at least a bachelor's degree. The U.N. has specific language requirements and requires candidates to pass a competitive exam.

## **Salary range**

Salaries vary widely. The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists the 2012 median wage of interpreters as \$45,430. The salary range of U.N. interpreters is anywhere from \$46,000 to \$133,000, with even higher pay for directors. Freelance interpreters working for the U.N. are paid rates that vary by country. Currently, the U.S. rate is \$647 per day.

## **For more information**

**International Association of Conference Interpreters**

[www.aiic.net/careers](http://www.aiic.net/careers)

**United Nations Language Outreach**

[www.unlanguage.org/Careers](http://www.unlanguage.org/Careers)