A tall, clear glass filled with water, with a metal straw inserted. Bubbles are rising from the straw. To the right of the glass is a silver, mesh-covered microphone. The background is a solid blue color.

HOW Do You Do That?

By Ewandro Magalhães
(Translated from the original Portuguese by
Barry Slaughter Olsen)

The conference opens with an address in a foreign language. The speaker launches headlong into a highly complex subject at breakneck speed, in language that is replete with terms whose spelling I can only guess, most encoded in an alphabet soup of acronyms. To make matters worse, he insists on cracking jokes as culturally-specific as they are untranslatable.

Settled into my booth at the back of the room, I diligently repeat every word, every idea, in my own language. I simply cannot stop moving my mouth. My head is adorned with a pair of headphones and a microphone that make me look like a pop star. Isolated from the audience by a glass partition, I am often the target of the occasional fleeting glance from spectators who

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cannot help but turn around.

The speech ends, and a lively question-and-answer session ensues, forcing me to interpret the audience's questions into a foreign language and the speaker's answers back into Portuguese. Fifteen minutes later, the linguistic shootout is suspended for a merciful coffee break.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I set

down my headphones. I slip out of the booth and an enormous sense of freedom washes over me. Still somewhat dazed and without a clear recollection of the past 30 minutes, I weave my way through the crowd that has inundated the lobby. By the buffet table, a woman approaches me. She has a headset in her hands and probably a still vivid memory of my voice

in her ears. I anticipate a complaint and scan her face for any sign of dissatisfaction. But to my surprise she congratulates me on the clarity of my interpreting and then follows up with a question that has been nagging her since the beginning of the conference: “How do you do that?!”

The Storytelling Problem

In his thought-provoking book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell talks about what he calls the storytelling problem. He says human beings “are a bit too quick to come up with explanations for things we really don’t have an explanation for.” We are uncomfortable with not being able to find rational explanations for what we do or feel. We are left with a disturbing sense of uselessness, the impression that things happen by chance, that our performance is the result of random variables beyond our control. Unable to deduce logical conclusions from evidence, we feel frustrated. And to escape that frustration, we tell a story. We devise our own hypothesis and arbitrarily accept it as fact, soon clinging to that “fact” as a way of giving meaning to what we do. We are not trying to conceal anything, nor are we pathological liars. It is simply part of being human.

For years, Andre Agassi, one of the greatest tennis players of all time, credited the success of his forehand technique to an almost imperceptible turn of his wrist when hitting the ball. Precise digitized imaging, however, shows something else entirely. His wrist only begins to turn long after he hits the ball. Despite the evidence, it would be hard to convince him otherwise. He *feels* that way. Yet, he is wrong. The wrist rotation is simply the story he tells himself.

Like tennis, much remains to be explained concerning simultaneous

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interpreting. We do not know for sure which neurological phenomena make it possible for the brain to coordinate so many processes at once. It is as if the brain splits but at the same time remains more connected than ever. And if it does actually split, it certainly does not just split in two, but rather into multiple parallel brains that work on thousands of concurrent tasks that we are hardly conscious of or not conscious of at all.

Gladwell sheds new light on this phenomenon, exposing an adaptive unconscious that reasons at high speed while relying on minimum information. The adaptive unconscious is what allows us to make these snap decisions. It operates according to a mechanism of its own, invisible to that part of our brain that wants explanations for everything. But it works behind a locked door. It is fickle and reserved. It does not take kindly to invasions of its privacy, nor does it offer up its secrets freely. It works best when left alone. It cannot be drowned out by rational analysis, and it does not like being asked “why?”

Interpreting is about making decisions, and good decision-making depends not on the volume of data available, but rather on our ability to extract the most meaning from the thinnest slices of reality. Always in a race against time, interpreters live under pressure and cannot always afford the luxury of collecting large amounts of information. They have to do more with less. They must edit, limit the number of options available,

and forgo lengthy word-choice processes. They have to be economical and objective. They have to be frugal. The adaptive unconscious allows them to do just that.

Matters that involve what we would call *insight* follow a different set of rules. In these cases, thinking—that is, conscious thinking in a traditional sense—usually bogs us down. A classical guitarist is capable of executing from memory complex pieces learned through systematic practice. Yet, after a long period of inactivity he will have a difficult time remembering a solo in its entirety. The first chords will come with ease, but at any moment his fingers may get lost, and the rest of the piece just will not be there. When that happens, reproducing the melody in one’s head or analytically studying the fretboard does little to bring back the lost notes. The solution musicians have discovered is to repeat the section they can remember over and over while deliberately trying to ignore the music. When they stop consciously trying to remember, as they relax and focus their attention elsewhere without thinking or wondering why, the music returns. The hand comes alive and it is the fingers that do the remembering. But in order for that to happen, the rational mind must be turned off. The door has to be shut. The brain must be locked out.

Even so, a word of caution is in order. Our unconscious mind may be autonomous and have a life of its own, but it does not always get it ➔

right. It requires the cognitive environment previously created by our conscious effort. It relies on previously directed effort, systematic training, specific preparation, and accumulated experience. Left to its own devices, without the counterpoint of reason and traditional knowledge, our unconscious tends toward more immediate stereotypes. It opens the door to our preconceptions, which quietly begin to dictate our decisions and preferences based on false premises, leading us to decisions that we ourselves do not understand. Left alone, our intuition also fails us.

Interpreters often receive information from sources they are unable to identify. There are things they remember through conscious memorization and analogy. Other pieces of information come from a different kind of memory, where the mere sound of a word in a foreign language seems to unleash inferences that automatically lead to its equivalent in the other language. Sometimes a nod of their booth mate's head or an almost imperceptible expression of the eye is all it takes to save them and bring just the right phrase to the fore. A casual reading of the program of a professional conference, minutes before it begins, or a care-less stroll through the exhibit hall, can be the perfect complement to hours of preparation the night before. In a sense, by need as well as intention, interpreters learn partly by osmosis, extracting as much as they can from broken conversa-

tions and texts, in a hodgepodge of random elements that surprisingly come together during the ensuing conference.

The Answer

As it turns out, our intuitive mind extends beyond our brain and at times even does without it. Our unconscious perceives and processes many signals that our rational mind cannot. It reaches under the surface and breaks down a complex picture into minimum units of meaning, the thinnest slices of the whole, getting as close as possible to the basics, to the DNA, if you will, of a situation. And it brings us information coded in almost instinctive impulses to act.

In the interpreting booth, this process can take various forms: an unusual sense of comfort with a speech or a speaker, an almost telepathic rapport with your colleague in the booth, that wonderful feeling of being able to read the mind of another person, at times even guessing what she has to say. This is when we are able to shake off the literalness of a speech and reconstruct ideas with our own vocabulary, expressing them as *we* normally would. This is when we are really interpreting, spontaneously and accurately, thanks to our surprisingly complete—and again inexplicable—understanding of a subject previously inaccessible to the uninitiated.

We have this ability to read body language, to derive solid inferences out of thin air, to discern intuitively the intention behind a speech, to finish a sentence based more on the feeling it inspires than on the words used to phrase it. We just have to think without thinking, balancing between the rational mind and that mysterious part of us that can make the impossible seem surprisingly trivial. We have the ability. We can do it. But what can we say about *how* it is done?

According to Joshua Aronson, one of the researchers quoted in *Blink*, “people are ignorant of the things that affect their actions, yet they rarely feel ignorant.” I could not agree more. Ultimately, how is it that we interpreters are able to do what we do? Over the years I have gathered many clues, some of which I tried to hint at here. But perhaps all I have done amounts to little more than storytelling.

In an effort to answer the question posed by that kind woman during the coffee break we shared so long ago, I have tried a number of keys to unlock the door. Despite my best efforts, it is still closed. All that is left is for me to accept Aronson's counsel and admit that the most honest answer I have to her question still is simply “I don't know.”

Notes

1. Gladwell, Malcolm. *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

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From the Executive Director Continued from p. 9

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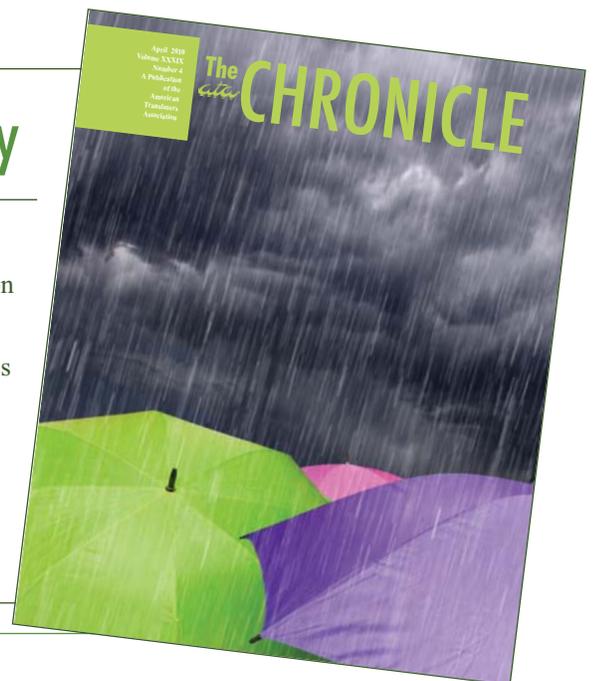
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