

## **The Interpreter as Maternal Container**

**(with specific reference to three Reagan-Gorbachev summits of the 1980s  
from the standpoint of the Soviet interpreters)**

**3360 words**

### **Introduction**

In this essay I will outline Bion's theory of container-contained (Bion 1962) and describe how interpreters often view themselves, and are viewed as, something akin to a maternal container. I will touch upon the potentially catastrophic (if often humorous) results of poor interpretation and ask if they might be comparable to the genuinely catastrophic results of poor containment in the mother-infant scenario.

I will then describe, with reference only to the 1980s Reagan-Gorbachev summits in Reykjavik, Washington and Moscow, how the Soviet container-interpreters helped the US and Soviet leaders over the hurdles towards knowledge and, eventually, towards the end of the Cold War. I suggest that this knowledge might helpfully be described as K in the Bionian sense and will show how Bion's thinking (and that of carefully selected others) sheds light on the complex task of the simultaneous interpreter.

Within these descriptions, though with access only to anecdotal evidence, I intend to show that the ‘good enough’ (Winnicott 1965) interpreter provides a reverie (Bion 1962) for his principle and thereby facilitates a positive re-introjection of material into both principle and interlocutor and, therefore, an ability to tolerate frustration that might enable the building of realistic relationships with the world at large and, in ideal circumstances, to ensure relative peace.

### **Bion’s theory of the container and the contained and how it relates to the job of simultaneous interpretation**

Bion’s description of the container and the contained as the birth of thinking and of psychological development was in many ways a continuation of both Freudian and Kleinian thought. Melanie Klein shed new light on the Freudian pleasure-unpleasure principle and the early ‘psychical system’ he presaged (Freud 1911) by describing the infant defence mechanism of projective identification, by which means the young child splits off whatever is unbearable to him and evacuates it, or projects it, into the mother (Klein 1946).

Bion (1962) describes this process as far more than a primitive defence of the baby’s ego. He showed that this projective identification is in fact a crucial means

of communication between mother and baby and, indeed, the origin of thought. The infant projects his distress into the mother and she will, if all goes well, process that distress and return it to the child as something more manageable, more comprehensible. This process, in Bion's view, forms what he calls a K link between the two, the K standing for knowledge. Bion looked at thinking as communication, the ultimate aim being greater knowledge both of oneself and of the other and, therein, psychological development.

In the same work Bion depicts K as a holy grail that the infant ego must fight for and that can only be achieved in tandem with an object whose grip on her own reality principle is strong. He describes potential failures of this achievement as 'No K' (which is an extension of 'no breast'), a mindlessness that renders the ego incapable of knowing itself and others, and of 'Minus K', a link, but one that leads only to hopeless misunderstanding.

So, in this projective-introjective intercourse the mother becomes a container for the child's emotional world and that world is the contained, transformed by her reverie (her concern for and involvement with the child) into something that can be re-introjected into the child in a digestible form. If the mother fails to provide this function then 'the unpleasurable is retained' and 'omnipotence replaces thinking.' (O'Shaughnessy, 1981).

It strikes me that the simultaneous interpreter performs a maternal container role for his principle and for that principle's interlocutor or audience. The interpreter takes the spoken words of the principle, heavy with meaning and emotion and, without the luxury of conscious thought, digests the meaning on all levels before reformulating the digested words and emotions into something that will be understood in a second language, that will be digestible, manageable and will result in greater mutual knowledge. The interpreter is the K link between speaker and listener. (O'Shaughnessy's omnipotence in the place of thinking is surely familiar to all of us in the form of all the world's brutal dictators.)

Igor Korchilov, who interpreted for Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, describes simultaneous interpretation as 'pervoploschenie'. He translates this as meaning 'to be in someone else's shoes' but its literal meaning is to cross over into someone else's flesh. Knowledge and mutual understanding are the key goals of the principle and the interpreter in the first instance, and only then with the third party, the world at large. The simultaneous interpreter must absorb the principle's projections and 'catch the essence of his message and not simply repeat what he is saying in another language.' (Korchilov 1997).

It should be noted that there is a major difference between consecutive interpretation, when the interpreter has time to think through his translation in a conscious way, and simultaneous interpretation when he must rely far more on

‘pervoploschenie’, the oneness that is a result of massive projective identification (Klein 1946). (Simultaneous interpretation was first used meaningfully at the Nuremberg trials also in 1946 when Hermann Goring complained of the interpreters and their new method: “They are shortening my life!” (Korchilov 1997))

In ‘Notes on Memory and Desire’ (1967) Bion writes: ‘Memory is always misleading as a record of fact since it is distorted by the influence of unconscious forces. Desires interfere, by absence of mind when observation is essential, with the operation of judgement.’ This seems to me to be a perfect description of what simultaneous interpreters do not do. For them there is no time for memory or desire, only a necessity to rely on the kind of ‘relaxed attention’ (Bion 1962) so essential for the kind of transference of words, thoughts and ideas that I believe goes on in the projective-introjective cycle of simultaneous interpretation.

Describing the experience of simultaneous interpretation, Korchilov writes; ‘The interpreter is alone in the crosscurrent of ideas and in the midst of a sea of words...I seemed to have no existence of my own – I gave myself entirely to my job as if I were indeed in my principal’s shoes – that was pervoploscheniye in practice.’ (Korchilov 1997)

It is not just the experience of the interpreters that leads me to compare the whole experience of being in the 'psychic flow' (Money-Kyrle 1968) of simultaneous interpretation to the early mother-child relationship and the reverie that gives meaning to the child's communications and makes them comprehensible. It is also the child-like dependence of the principle on the interpreter. The principle cannot be understood without the interpreter, his utterings without his interpreter are as incomprehensible as a baby's cries are to a stranger. Although the below examples are humorous, they nonetheless serve to underline the potentially catastrophic results of misunderstanding, of Minus K, results that are comparable, I believe, to the lack of growth, the stripping of vitality that Bion describes as being the result of Minus K in the mother-infant relationship (Bion 1962).

In his memoirs Korchilov recalls a major international conference at which the Soviet delegate said: 'V ogordoe buzina, a v Kieve dyad'ka.' Literally, this means; 'The elderberry is in the kitchen garden but my uncle lives in Kiev.' It is, in fact, a way of accusing someone of using a non-sequitur. However, the interpreter didn't know the idiom and the speaker had already moved on so he took a bizarre punt. 'Something is rotten in the kingdom of Denmark,' he said. At this the Danish delegate protested the 'unwarranted slur on Denmark' and began a lecture in democracy, declaring his country as 'a paragon compared to the inhuman, totalitarian system' in the country of the Soviet delegate. The Soviet

delegate was dumbfounded and called the outburst a 'provocation', since, of course, he never mentioned Denmark.

Viktor Sukhodrev, who translated for Soviet leaders from Krushchev to Gorbachev, also gives an example of what a misunderstanding might lead to, using a phrase of Leonid Brezhnev's (General Secretary of the USSR from 1964-1982); 'Prochniy soyuz druzhby' – a solid bond of friendship (Mydans 2005). Sukhodrev describes his delight at having seized upon the word 'bond' because 'Soyuz' most commonly means union, as in The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, a use which would have given the wrong impression and would have misconstrued Brezhnev.

Sukhodrev had an intuitive understanding of Brezhnev's needs, as a mother in her reverie might of a child. Bion (1970) described emotional experience as the nourishment the truth needs in order to keep the mental apparatus alive and to permit it to grow through experience. It is this tenuous truth that the interpreter must seek without actively seeking. A mother's failure to provide a container for a child's anxieties leads to catastrophe in terms of psychic development. In terms of simultaneous interpretation from one language to another the truth is the full meaning (emotional and linguistic) of what the principle is saying and the psychic development is the positive progress towards resolution of conflict at which the interlocutors are hopefully aiming.

**The Reagan-Gorbachev Summits in Reykjavik 1986, Moscow 1987 and Washington 1988 from the point of view of two Soviet interpreters. A demonstration of how Bionian theory sheds light on the complex task of the simultaneous interpreter.**

### **Reykjavik**

When the US and Soviet leaders met in Reykjavik in October 1986 relations were tense. US President Ronald Reagan was single-mindedly committed to SDI (a nuclear missile defence shield in outer space commonly known as Star Wars) and negotiations on the abolition of short-range nuclear missiles had ground to a standstill at the Geneva summit in 1985. Only a few years earlier Reagan had described USSR as the 'evil empire' in a speech to the religious right and in 1984 he was caught off-mike joking about bombing Russia. The Soviets saw Reagan as a crazed cowboy hell-bent on apocalypse and the Americans at the time fully expected the expansionist USSR to initiate a global nuclear Armageddon (Korchilov 1997). It would be no exaggeration to describe both superpowers as embedded in a paranoid-schizoid mode of thinking and behaviour.

An example of this mode of thinking and the effort to change it came with Reagan's attempt, in Reykjavik, to expel paranoia out of the US-USSR relationship and into the threatening world at large. Reagan described Star Wars as

a 'gas mask', a protection against nuclear weapons even if they, the US and USSR, decided to destroy them. Imagine, he said, a madman like Gadhafi having nuclear weapons and threatening to use them. Palazchenko noted that Reagan was ingeniously divesting himself of the label of madman by applying it to another. (Palazchenko 1997).

Palazchenko, who still interprets for Mikhail Gorbachev today, recalls his principle in Reykjavik; 'His speech might seem rambling at times, and his expressions awkward. He seemed to be thinking aloud. And though listening to him and interpreting his words I sometimes thought his meaning was not too clear, later when I recorded his conversations I almost invariably found that he had provided a fresh angle on the issues of the day and clarified at least his own view of the situation, if not the situation itself.'

Talking of the transference in an analytic setting, Melanie Klein (1952) explained that the analysand experiences not only an object but a total situation. What is projected into the analyst is bound up with a cornucopia of psychic phenomena, and it is all of this which, transferred, becomes Bion's contained. The analyst must detect the meaning of this whole by means of his 'free floating attention' (Freud 1900) and the avoidance of memory and desire (Bion 1967). With this in mind it is interesting to note that Palazchenko himself was not aware of the meanings he had imparted to President Reagan until after the event, and that

during the process he had simply been the recipient of the projections which he had reformulated and made digestible in another language without the effort of conscious thought but in a state of reverie.

This is perhaps another way of describing Bion's alpha-function (Bion 1962), a process performed by the mother/container and 'one that is needed for conscious thinking and reasoning and for the relegation of thinking to the unconscious when it is necessary to disencumber consciousness of the burden of thought by learning a skill.' It is this disencumberment that the interpreter must effect in order to do his job well.

### **Washington**

In Washington, December 1987, the two leaders met again with the result that all intermediate range nuclear missiles were destroyed, after which the world, which had genuinely entertained the prospect of nuclear holocaust, breathed easier. The USSR in fact destroyed far more missiles than the US, but Gorbachev reasoned that the end result would be equal – no INF missiles. For, although both leaders were advised to be wary (Gorbachev by Edvard Shevardnadze and Andrei Gromyko, and Reagan chiefly by George Shultz) the men were beginning to trust each other. If 'verbal thought is bound up with awareness of psychic reality' (Bion 1954) then perhaps the psychic reality here was that, despite everything, real

knowledge in the form of mutual understanding was being reached, or, rather, facilitated, between the two men.

Pavel Palazchenko is widely credited in Russia for being heavily instrumental in bringing about the end of the Cold War, for softening Gorbachev's Soviet rhetoric for a nervous Reagan and giving a kind of Russian peasant wisdom to Reagan's bad jokes and simple phraseology (Palazchenko 1997). When Gorbachev quoted the Bible (highly unusual for a Soviet leader) Palazchenko was unique among Soviet interpreters in having the King James version memorised to impress English-speakers in just such an eventuality. Reagan was later to remark; 'I have to believe that if he [Gorbachev] is talking to God, we ought to get along, because so am I.' (Palazchenko 1997).

However, that winter on the White House steps Reagan saluted the Gorbachevs' visit to Washington as 'a coming together not of allies, but of adversaries.' Korchilov was interpreting and, without thinking, chose the fourth variant for the translation of 'adversary' in the Galperin two volume Bolshoi English-Russian Dictionary – 'soperniki' (competitors) as opposed to 'protivniki' (adversaries). Thus a difficult situation was averted by Korchilov's ability to 'remain integrated but lose rigidity', a vital aspect of the good Bionian container (Bion 1962).

Later, at the day two press conference, Reagan light-heartedly suggested that the negotiators 'get some well-deserved rest', but Gorbachev took this to mean that only the Soviets should get some rest and he shot back; 'We're not going to do that.' The press laughed, but the tension of misunderstanding was palpable. 'The possibility of misunderstanding always hovered over our meetings,' writes Jack Matlock, a US ambassador to the Soviet Union who was present at many of the meetings between the two leaders (Chernayev 2000).

These two examples from Korchilov's memoirs, above, serve to illustrate the acute vulnerability of K and the tiny modification of interpretation that would transform it into Minus K, as well as showing the monumental importance of the interpreter's role as container for the ideas and feelings of his interpretees. \*

For, when the mother is unable to contain or metabolise, the child is even more terrified by his emotions. 'He destroys his own capacity both for introspection and perception of others who become contaminated and distorted by these projections,' (Folch 1988). This statement seems to me to be equally true of world leaders whose meaning is being misunderstood or misrepresented. As described above, it was Gorbachev in Washington who was more easily offended, more apt to lapse into an enviously (Klein 1957) aggressive attitude, who was less able to tolerate frustration. In another exchange at this historic summit Reagan irritated him with a mildly anti-Soviet joke and he snapped at Reagan; 'Tell ambassador Matlock to stop collecting such jokes; otherwise we won't have time

left to improve relations between our countries.’ Yet, although Gorbachev bridled easily, Korchilov writes; ‘He was willing to listen and learn from his mistakes. He was capable of evolving and taking into account the views of others.’

It is this ability to evolve along with Reagan that seems to me indicative of the ‘growth’ described by Bion (1962) as the result of a container (the interpreter) and contained (the peace process) permeated by and susceptible to emotion. This growth, of course, is a mutual process experienced simultaneously by the container and the source of the contained which are ‘dependent on each other for mutual benefit and without harm to either.’ (Bion 1962)

At the end of the Washington summit Korchilov notes that the two leaders; ‘found themselves talking in virtually the same language of hope and optimism.’ This, I believe is the essence of both containment and interpretation – making the languages of two creatures who are potentially incomprehensible to each other (regardless of whether that language might be Russian or an emotional cry or facial expression) the same, with all the strength of meaning intended, emotional and linguistic.

On this occasion the result of ‘growth’ was that Reagan and Gorbachev ‘demonstrated that they and their two nations could put aside lingering hostilities and act responsibly in pursuit of a more secure world.’ (Korchilov 1997)

## **Moscow**

At the leaders' next summit in Moscow, May 1988, more lapses in mutual understanding occurred when Gorbachev told Reagan that he was wrong to continue to insist on Star Wars. 'Vas vvodyat v zabluzhdeniye Vashi pomoshniki,' he said. 'Your aides are leading you up the wrong track.' However, the interpreter, a colleague of Korchilov, told Reagan; 'Your aides are deceiving you.' The error was corrected by a whisper to Colin Powell.

Later the leaders later got bogged down in the wording of their mutual agreement. Reagan refused the phrase 'peaceful co-existence' believing that it had echoes of Krushchev's language during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Gorbachev was baffled and Korchilov comments that; 'A psychological gap remained between him and Reagan.' It is, of course, that psychological gap that the interpreter/container is constantly trying to bridge.

'We did our best to smooth over the rough spots and inaccuracies in Gorbachev's colloquial speech,' Korchilov explains. 'The most important thing was to get across his thoughts and ideas without distorting them.' The same is surely true of a mother attempting to process the projected bad breast and to transform it into an internalisable capacity to bear frustration and her absence. The mother's ability to perform these tasks 'is not only due to her receptivity but is also based on her

ability to stand uncertainty and disappointments with patience.’ (Carpelan 1989).

The interpreter too must bear an imperfect world.

The interpreter, said Sukhodrev (Mydans 2005), is ‘invisible in plain sight’, suggesting something akin to the Winnicottian (1965) mother-infant dyad in which one does not exist without the other, and he writes; ‘It’s an almost mystical feeling that you are bringing people together, people who otherwise would never be able to communicate.’ The mystical feeling, I would argue, arises from the sense of union with the principle, the result of a massive and mutual projective identification.

## **Conclusion**

I have described Bion’s theory of the container and the contained and shown how it applies to the role of the interpreter who could be described as functioning in the capacity of a maternal container. The ‘expanding universe of limitless possibilities for knowledge’ (Bion 1962), infinite possibilities, which he believes open up to the infant via the cycle of introjection and projection with the mother, can equally apply to the possibilities within any relationship, including that of two world leaders, guided into K with all its ‘psychic pain’ by a skilful interpreter and his unconscious reverie. The truth, writes Bion (1962) is nourishment for thinking and

growth, whereas lying, as the Cold War surely demonstrated, is poison to that growth.

In describing the dynamic interaction between container and contained Bion (1962) states that; 'What talking was originally done by the mother, possibly a rudimentary designatory function, is replaced by the infant's own baby talk.' It seems to me possible that through good enough containing interpretation world leaders may indeed, on a certain level, end up speaking the same language.

\*The interpreter's importance as a keeper of secrets is well-known to be paramount. A favourite interpreters' anecdote is a story that President Nixon used to enjoy telling. Churchill and Stalin stayed up late drinking at the Yalta conference in 1945 and in the morning Churchill apologised saying; 'I hope I wasn't too indiscreet last night.' Stalin joked; 'Don't worry. I had the interpreter shot.' (Berezhkov, 1994)

## References

Berezhkov, V. (1994) '*At Stalin's Side*,' New York: Carol

Bion , W. R. (1957) '*Differentiation of the psychotic from the non-psychotic personalities*,' International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 38: 266-75

Bion , W. R. (1962) '*Learning from Experience*,' London: Heinemann

Bion , W. R. (1967) '*Notes on memory and desire*,' The Psychoanalytic Forum, 2: 272-3, 279-80

Carpelan, H. (1989) '*Reflections on Bion's Container Function and its Pathology*,' Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review, 12:145-161.

Chernayev, A. (2000) '*My Six Years With Gorbachev*,' Pennsylvania:Penn State University Press.

De Foch, T (1988) '*Communication and containing in child analysis: towards terminability,*'

International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 69: 105-112

Freud, S. (1900) '*The Interpretation of dreams,*' Standard Edition Volume 5, London:Hogarth (1953)

Freud, S. (1911) '*Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,*' Standard Edition, Volume 12, London:Hogarth (1953)

Klein, M. (1952) '*The origins of transference,*' Envy and Gratitude and other works 1946-1963, London: Hogarth (1975)

Klein, M. (1957) '*Envy and Gratitude,*' Envy and Gratitude and other works 1946-1963, London:Hogarth (1975)

Klein, M. (1946) '*Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,*' Envy and Gratitude and other works 1946-1963, London:Hogarth (1975)

Korchilov, I. (1997), '*Translating History,*' New York: Scribner

Money-Kyrle, R. (1968) '*Cognitive Development*,' International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 49; 691-8.

Mydans, S (2005) *Man in the middle at US-Soviet summits*, The International Herald Tribune, (September 30<sup>th</sup> 2005)

O'Shaughnessy, E. (1981) '*A Commemorative Essay on W.R. Bion's theory on thinking*,' Journal of Child Psychotherapy (1981)

Palazchenko, P. (1997) '*My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze*,' Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University.

Rosenfeld, H. (1981) '*On the psychopathology and treatment of psychotic patients*,' Do I Dare Disturb the Universe? pp. 167-79, James Grotstein ed. (1988)

Winnicott, D.W. (1965) '*The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment*,' London: Hogarth