

Lindsay Bywood interviews Carol Robertson on her experience of the early days of subtitling at the BBC



In 2019, I was lucky enough to meet Carol Robertson, at a lecture I gave about translation. She approached me to share her experience of the early days of subtitling. This is a transcript of my interview with her.

Carol: Basically, in the mid-seventies the BBC decided that they'd gone to 625 lines and there were spare lines that they didn't know what to do with. So, they came up with Ceefax which was a teletext service; It's the first, I believe, in the world. And it would give pages of information to people. I think it started in 1976, 75. I'm not too sure because I was living abroad then. But I joined in 1978 and I was a researcher and I had to look at consumer affairs stories; I wrote quizzes, I wrote film gossip. I wrote just about anything: reviewed films, opera, ballet, and sometimes theatre.

Lindsay: For Ceefax?

Carol: For Ceefax. Now, we were operating on these spare lines because all 625 lines weren't being used. Anyway, I did this, and one day the boss came and said, "we're going to do subtitling". So, he expected me to do the subtitling. He thought it was a doddle. On top of my own job. So, at that time the engineers at the BBC were in dispute with the BBC over pay and everything. So, the BBC's machines, whatever they used, was being held

together by sealing wax and string. And only the chief engineers could touch these things.

Lindsay: Do you remember what the dispute was about?

Carol: Pay

Lindsay: Pay

Carol: Always pay, always pay.

Lindsay: That's what I thought.

Carol: They didn't think they were getting enough, because ITV were earning a lot more money. I was offered about 50% more to go to the independent television Ceefax. It wasn't called Ceefax; it was called Oracle. But I didn't want to work in news, I wanted to work in documentaries. So I thought, I wanted to stay in the BBC because they are the best. Well, I think so anyway, or I did at the time.

They decided to subtitle *Malice Aforethought*, a four-part series, and I believe it was a true story about a murder, a man who poisoned his wife. So I was told to do the subtitles. Well, the thing is, the machine in those days was experimental. So, you could not do simultaneous subtitling. So you could only do mini précis. And you had to be very careful that you didn't cross shot, meaning you didn't want to put up the surprise or what they were saying before time. Well, this machine was not very good. Anyway, I was told, here are the scripts, go and do the subtitling. So I had to watch the video and then I'd type each piece. I was only allowed a couple of times to do it. And then I would have to write mini précis for each scene. And then I'd have to sit and look at the script, stop it and then insert, well not insert, I would jot down the timing of how long each piece of punched tape took to go through the reader head, the duration. And then I would run it through so I could see. So I had to do all these calculations. Well, they didn't care about me. I was stuck once in the Head of Drama's room. Sitting in his office doing it, can you believe? Other times I was sitting in the Ceefax Newsroom and one day I'm sitting there and there was a man looking over my shoulder and it was Paul Daniels and he said "Oh I love anything electronic, what are you doing?" So I just explained it to him.

Lindsay: That's very interesting, I didn't know that Paul Daniels loved subtitles.

Carol: Well it wasn't subtitles, he liked anything electronic and he could see what I was doing. But I used to have to sit in a busy newsroom.

Lindsay: With no headphones?

Carol: No headphones, I just had to sit there with all the news going on around me. I was intimidated by sitting in the Head of Drama's office, which was in a different building. I was at White City; This was on Shepherd's Bush Green, near what was the BBC theatre. Anyway, I was in the newsroom: awful, absolutely awful. So I said: "look, this isn't good enough", so I think I did the last one in the editing suites of the news editors, no windows or anything. So anyway, I did it. Now, I had to put it out live. That wasn't my job. That was actually an engineer's job. And I was told not to say anything. Because it could cause a strike. So, when it was the day of transmission, I had to sit in a newsroom, not in a special suite or anything and I had to use the stopwatch, timing it. Then I'd put the first tape in, but because it was such an experimental machine, I didn't know if it was going to take 10 seconds or 15 seconds to be read and then the actual length of the subtitle. And it would feed through and it would come up. So that's what I had to do.

Lindsay: So you were cueing the subtitles live as it was being broadcast?

Carol: Yes, as it was being broadcast

Lindsay: That must have been very nerve-racking

Carol: I remember the chief editor saying 'that went all right' after the first episode but then it was my second one and I got told off by him because I had made a spelling mistake. Nothing else was mentioned after that. And I had been sitting in the newsroom, it was really poor. And of course, you had to condense it.

I had to do my own job as well. I used to have to sit and do extra hours, but the BBC didn't take that into account, well my boss didn't. He thought it was a doddle of a job. So I would have to sit and press two buttons and out it would go to the world. But of course, we never knew exactly when it was going to go through because the machines were so experimental. So it was deemed a success. So then they started a magazine for the deaf called "No Need To Shout" and I did work for that and then they actually employed someone to write the magazine. But that was on the ordinary Ceefax system which listed when there was something going out with subtitles. People could look up a certain page and it was listed on the index of the screen. It would say 'subtitles for Joe Bloggs's wedding' or whatever. So it was always headlined, they didn't do a lot. After I did that it was deemed a success.

Lindsay: So that was the only programme that was being subtitled at that point?

Carol: No, there was a veteran BBC journalist and he used to sit all week, in his room, and he would subtitle a 10 or 15-minute news programme for the deaf. This wasn't on the Ceefax system. He was given all week to do it

Lindsay: For 15 minutes!?

Carol: And I was doing a drama where there were courtroom scenes.

Lindsay: I remember it!

Carol: And you had to be careful not to crash shot and all this business.

Lindsay: Can you remember how long the episodes were?

Carol: An hour.

Lindsay: An hour, that's what I thought.

Carol: I was doing that; I was so stressed about it, and the extra hours I had to do. I wanted to get on at the BBC. At the time, not so much now, you had to almost over prove yourself, but all he could say was that on the second episode I had made a spelling mistake.

Carol: And I just thought, you haven't given me proper conditions to work in.

Lindsay: And no training.

Carol: No training, nothing. So, after that they did employ people and they employed someone who was hard of hearing. She had the first hearing dog for the deaf. And she had a room to herself. Had quietness, took her time. So that's what it was, it was really stressful, terribly unfair. Done on an absolute shoestring.

Lindsay: Done in your free time basically. Well, no longer free time.

Carol: But you know, to try and sit and watch it, twice, and try and get it down. It took a lot of time because you had to punch tape, roll them up, put elastic bands on it. The sheer frenzy! And I'd be sitting in the newsroom, Ceefax newsroom, at night, putting it out live, when other people were working.

Lindsay: That's crazy. So, when they gave you the programme did they give you a VHS tape or what did they give you?

Carol: Yeah, they gave me a VHS tape, it was one of those loaders where...

Lindsay: The top loaders! I remember those.

Carol: But no training! Well there would have been a strike if they had known it was me. They seemed to think it was the bosses, the top boys but it wasn't it was just me.

Lindsay: And apart from the typo was there any other feedback from anyone? From any viewers?

Carol: Oh yes, it was enjoyed! But no one in the newsroom said well done, nobody! It was dumped on me as if it wasn't worthy.

Lindsay: Did you have a credit? Did it say subtitles by?

Carol: Nope

Lindsay: I don't really understand the punch tape thing, so how does it work?

Carol: Well it was a machine. As I typed in the letters it came out on a stream and there were little holes in it. They used it for early computers, very early computers.

Carol: The information was on punch tape. A bit like braille in a way. So, when it was going out live, I had to put it in, get it to the starter point. So, I'm trying to do all this then, look down there, look up there. Because I had to look at what was going on, try to remember, have the script there. It was horrible.

Lindsay: Wow, that sounds nerve racking! And was it one piece of tape per subtitle or was it one for the whole programme?

Carol: No, it was all separate tapes.

Lindsay: Every subtitle had a separate tape? How did you get them in the right order?

Carol: Numbering each tape, length of time going through the reader head. No one ever thought about how it was quite a difficult thing, or the logistics of a single person doing it by themselves.

Lindsay: It's technologically very advanced!

Carol: Yes, but it was just dumped on me, in the newsroom.

Lindsay: So, can you remember the name of the machine you used to create them? What did it look like? Just like a computer?

Carol: I can't be sure. Possibly Acorn. I can't remember as I wasn't interested. It was foisted on me and I was trying to do my own job. So, I wasn't terribly interested. It's just I kept thinking: this is going to help you later on. You know, just get this done. But none of the chief editors or anybody said anything.

Lindsay: So, you had a VHS player and a TV and then what?

Carol: Well I didn't have a VHS player all the time, I had to go to different places within BBC Television Centre, but I did once have a VHS player in the newsroom. But for some reason they took it away. It was 40 years ago, and it was something I didn't enjoy doing. But then they did this "No Need To Shout" which was a magazine for the hard of hearing, I had to write and edit stories for it and then they got a proper editor for it. A girl whose *raison d'être* was that. But I think the hard-of-hearing community appreciated it.

Lindsay: Oh, I'm sure. It was before my time; well, I remember Ceefax as a child. Was it the same sort of machine that was used for the rest of Ceefax?

Carol: No, it wasn't.

Lindsay: No, of course, because it would have to generate a punch tape.

Carol: All I remember was that I had a keyboard and I could generate these punch tapes.

Lindsay: And how did you indicate to the machine the time when it was meant to go in and out.

Carol: I had to sit and count it.

Lindsay: Oh my.

Carol: That's what I mean, so next to the words I had to write down the time it should go in, with a stopwatch. And how long it would take; I was like a demented demon. I mean, it wasn't full subtitles. It couldn't be. It was *précis* ones. I couldn't put too many in because of the length of it to read, because people had to follow it. But I got absolutely no praise, no thanks, just do that on top of your own job.

Lindsay: How awful!

Carol: I mean the thing is, I've never really thought about it 'till now. But that's how women were treated in those days.

Lindsay: I'm not sure it's that different now to be honest, maybe it's not so gender specific but I think there is still quite a lot of that.

Carol: I was just told to get on with it. Later on I wrote the subtitles for a series of *Blankety Blank*, a comedy quiz show. There would have been at least six in the series and they needed slightly fewer subtitles than the drama.

Lindsay: I remember that drama, I was asking my mum because I remember her watching it. She remembers it very well.

Carol: Hywel Bennett was the star.

Lindsay: What happened afterwards then? Did you get to work on documentaries?

Carol: Yes, I did. I didn't really enjoy working in news.

Lindsay: Do you watch television now?

Carol: I do, but I pick holes in it.

Lindsay: Do you ever watch subtitles?

Carol: I do! But now some subtitled words are completely wrong because I think its voice activated.

Lindsay: It is.

Carol: They're hilarious sometimes. But at least they've got simultaneous and I think that's terrific.

Lindsay: What do you think of the programmes now?

Carol: I watch a lot of BBC Four. I watch this Italian one called Montalbano

Lindsay: Oh, my mum likes that

Carol: The author has just died this week, but anyway you never see people round there in Sicily it's always quite surreal, like a Dali painting.

Lindsay: I heard the subtitles for that are quite good

Carol: Yes, they are, but what they are saying isn't what's coming up. Because they swear a lot.

Lindsay: Oh, that's interesting.

Carol: On the whole it is good.

Lindsay: Thank you so much for sharing your experience with me today.