

BEST PRACTICES GUIDE 05: INTERPRETING

The Case for Interpreting

Many historically indelible words have resulted from rather obvious misinterpretations. For example, the names of places such as Yucatan, Nome and Guinea were formulated at moments in which two groups of quite different humans stood face to face with one another in the absence of a common language and nobly tried to converse nonetheless.

In each case, one group, representing a society with the power to permanently engrave its response into the historical record, posed a simple question, “What do you call this place?”

The other group, unable to comprehend the question, responded variously by exclaiming their incomprehension, professing their ignorance or, in the case of “Guinea”, by guessing that the gesture that accompanied the question actually referred to a third group of people standing nearby watching.

Thus, in their native languages, Yucatan, Nome and Guinea actually mean “What did you say?”, “I don’t know” and “woman” respectively. In all cases, an interpreter would have sufficed to pose a comprehensible question to one party, and provide a sensible answer to the other.

As the translation of the spoken word, interpreting is the very essence of multilingualism: a single person speaking in multiple tongues. In the case of **simultaneous interpreting**, the interpreter listens to one language and immediately repeats what is said in a second language. **Consecutive interpreting** requires that the interpreter work in both directions. However, these seemingly simple tasks in fact require a highly complex effort in which the interpreter is listening, comprehending, formulating speech, producing speech and monitoring speech in two languages. In the case of simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter is doing all of these things at the same time.

The key to excellent interpreting in all cases is, of course, an excellent interpreter. However, as in the case of translation, mere knowledge of the languages involved is not necessarily sufficient. The interpreter should be versed in the subject matter(s) involved as well. Furthermore, interpreting is a specialized skill that requires practice and training.

While successful interpreting depends upon the skill and experience of the interpreter, those who enlist the services of an interpreter can contribute by understanding the nature of the task the interpreter performs and making the necessary provisions to assist him or her.



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Simultaneous Interpreting

Often referred to as **conference interpreting**, this is the work that we associate with the United Nations and international tribunals in which linguists sit in sound isolation booths wearing microphone/earphone headsets, and each member of the audience wears a headset connected to the interpreter speaking his/her language. Each interpreter listens to participants speaking in one of several languages, and simultaneously (in fact, there is generally a delay of three or four seconds) repeats what is said in a second of those several languages. Note that, typically, simultaneous interpreters work in only “one direction.” This means that for a given pair of languages, they listen to only one and interpret into the other. As such, in a conference interpreting context it may be necessary to hire several interpreters. If, for instance, you will have presentations and discussions between speakers of French, Chinese, English and German, in order to cover every possible combination, you will most likely need 12 different interpreters. In addition, as simultaneous interpreting is extremely fatiguing, it is typically necessary to have a pair of interpreters for each language combination.

Conference Interpreting Equipment

Note that along with the interpreters, it is also necessary to rent the appropriate equipment and to have it set up and ready in time for the event. At least one technician is required to set up the equipment and to monitor it during use. Contemporary conference interpreting equipment can be wired or wireless. Wireless (FM) equipment offers maximum flexibility. However, it is inherently insecure. Closed loop (wired) or infrared equipment supply more secure alternatives.

Preparation

Whenever possible, it is highly recommended that the interpreters be presented with copies of speeches, presentations and any other applicable background information, including glossaries, handouts, and conference schedules. In particular, if technical or proprietary terminology of any kind is involved, it is best to establish preferred translations well before the conference. By extension, by translating all handouts and materials associated with the event, you will help enrich the experience for all of the attendees as well as assisting the interpreters in their highly complex and stressful task.

Consecutive Interpreting

Consecutive interpreting is essentially interpreting for conversations in which the interpreter listens to one party and then turns to the other and repeats what was said in the second language and vice versa.

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Consecutive interpreting is common to depositions, courtroom and other legal proceedings, and business meetings. While simultaneous interpreting is all but simultaneous, consecutive interpreting implies the give and take of conversation, and it behooves those speaking to bear in mind that the interpreter has to remember what is said, formulate a translation and then speak it. If the speaker goes on and on, the interpreter is faced with a very difficult task. Thus, the consecutive interpreter gains immensely from working with those who recognize the difficulty at hand.

As in the case of simultaneous interpreting, it is recommended that consecutive interpreters be provided with available glossaries, reference materials, texts to which the conversation will refer and any other applicable materials well in advance of the assignment.

Escort Interpreting

Escort interpreters perform consecutive interpreting on the move. They can accompany their clients anywhere necessary. In addition, they can assist foreigners with the ins and outs of living, working or traveling in a different society and culture.

Multilingual Tour Guides

Either using portable wireless equipment similar to that used for conference interpreting, or without equipment, a multilingual tour guide provides commentary and explanation during walking tours, museum visits or bus tours as required.

InterNation, Inc. provides a full spectrum of foreign language services to a Fortune 1000 clientele. Services include translation, Web localization, electronic publishing, interpreting, subtitling and voice replacement for audio and video.

Our staff is dedicated to producing the highest quality work on time and on budget.

This guide is one of a series provided as a resource to current and prospective clients.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information.