

# How To Work Effectively With Interpreters

One of the greatest rewards for an interpreter is the knowledge that the parties understood each other and that communication took place. Being a cultural and linguistic professional, interpreter plays a paramount role in making sure this happens. You, however, can also do many things to help the interpreter achieve this goal. One probably does not realize it, but there are numerous ways in which you can assist the interpreter. Rather than blaming the interpreter for a bad performance, see what you can do to avoid unsatisfactory results.

This article is based on my personal experience and observations while interpreting for various organizations and professionals in different fields. The goal was to compile a comprehensive list of tips and give a general overview of how to work effectively with interpreters. It must be noted, however, that these tips will help mostly those professionals who work with interpreters specializing in consecutive interpretation. Consecutive interpretation refers to a situation in which one individual speaks and then waits for interpreter to interpret it. Simultaneous interpretation, when you speak and interpreter interprets at the same time, is a complete different subject.

## Interpreting vs. Translating

Make sure that you understand the difference between "interpreting" and "translating". Interpreting provides the facilitation of oral communication from one language to another. Translating, on the other hand, deals with written texts. Not all good interpreters are good translators and vice versa!

## Meet with interpreter

It is always a good idea to meet with the interpreter before the session to discuss briefly what you will be talking about. Explain the purpose of the meeting and go over any materials that will be used. When possible, provide written texts and other supporting documents before the interpreting session. It is always helpful for the interpreter to know the gist of the situation and topic of the conversation.

## Interpreting in the first person

A professional interpreter will always interpret in the first person. If a client says: "I had a surgery in December", the interpreter will start the sentence with "I..." instead of: "He said that he...".

## Speak directly to the other party

Talk to the other party directly and not to the interpreter. Instead of saying: "Ask him what his birthday is", you should directly ask a non-English speaker using first-person language: "What is your birthday?" A non-English speaker may understand more English than he/she can express. Do not reduce him/her to a nonentity being talked about rather than being talked with. The fact that a person does not speak your language does not make him stupid. Whether or not a person speaks English, he/she should be treated with respect. Vocal intonations, facial expressions and body language still convey a great deal of information regardless of language barrier.

## Eye contact

Make eye contact with the other party and maintain it at all times - not the interpreter!

## Speak clearly

Make sure you speak clearly and distinctly so that interpreter can understand you. Do not mumble or swallow your words or sounds. The interpreter should hear you and the other party very well. The best place for interpreter is somewhere close to you and the other party or between the two of you. Loud sounds, background noises make it very difficult to interpret, and it is also distractive.

## Pause for interpretation

Do not forget to pause after 3-4 sentences to give the interpreter an opportunity to interpret what you have just said. Slow down! This is for your own benefit: the more you speak without giving the interpreter a moment to interpret, the greater is the chance that the interpreter will miss some important details. It might be also a good

idea to arrange a signal for the interpreter to stop you if something is not clear or you need to pause for interpretation.

## **Avoid acronyms, slang, and jargon**

Avoid using acronyms, slang or specific terms that the interpreter might not know. Often a "short" acronym stands for an entire concept that must be fully explained and translated in a foreign language. Instead of using acronyms, use full words and simple explanations. If you must use professional jargon, explain it to the interpreter before the interpreting session.

## **Reduce use of jokes and idioms**

In your conversation try not to use too many jokes, puns or idioms unless they are rehearsed with the interpreter ahead of time. They are very hard to interpret as they are specific to a particular culture and in a different culture they might mean a completely different thing or could be nonsensical. Also, it might take an interpreter a few moments to think of a similar idiom in the target language.

## **Use simple language**

Avoid the use of double negatives, passive voice and ambiguous language.

## **Avoid side conversations**

Have only one person speak at a time and avoid side conversations. If you do not want something to be interpreted, **do not say it!** The interpreter will interpret **everything** that is said at a meeting.

## **Non-existing concepts**

Some concepts you might want to talk about may not even exist in the other language. Sometimes it might take a whole sentence to interpret one word, as the interpreter will have to use some kind of explanation to interpret your term or concept. For example, in Russia there is generally no medical insurance, and as a result no real terms exist to interpret such words as "co-payment", "deductible", "HMO", or a whole concept about "privacy practices". Do not expect a word-by-word interpretation.

## **Cultural differences**

If it seems to you that the other party simply cannot understand something after you have explained it several times and you are still talking about different things, you might need some help from the interpreter. The problem here might be in cultural differences. In this case the interpreter may play a role of a cultural broker and help explain the concept to you or the other party.

## **Note taking**

It is quite common for interpreters to take notes while interpreting (dates, numbers, places, etc.). Be aware of that and do not be surprised if you see interpreter writing something.

## **Sensitive issues**

When hiring an interpreter for an interpreting session be sensitive to cultural and/or religious differences as well as varieties and dialects of certain languages. Consider your situation and the non-English speaker, when deciding whether a male or female interpreter would be more appropriate for a particular interpreting session. In some cultures female interpreters might not feel comfortable interpreting for male clients.

## **Subject matter knowledge**

When you need an interpreter to interpret specialized subjects, make sure that the interpreter knows and understands the subject matter. Being fluent in a foreign language does not automatically make a person knowledgeable in many subjects. As an example, just being fluent in English has not helped me to better understand physics. Interpreters cannot know terminology in all fields.

## **Time allocation**

Be patient and allocate your time appropriately. Interpreting will take time. Think about it as if you need to say everything twice.

## **Asking questions**

Sometimes an interpreter might stop you and ask a question if he/she needs clarification of what you have just

said. It is normal and acceptable; sometimes even necessary to make sure that the parties understand each other. Encourage the interpreter to ask questions when not sure of a term, phrase, concept, etc. Say the same thing in different words if your question or statement is misunderstood, or rephrase your question. If, however, interpreter interrupts you too much, asks too many questions or is uncertain in what he/she says, you might want to question whether or not you hired a qualified interpreter.

## **Interpreter's opinion**

Do not ask the interpreter about his/her opinion. You are not talking to the interpreter, but - to a non-English speaker. Interpreters' job is only to interpret and help the communication take place, and not to render personal opinions. If you are interested in the interpreter's opinion for cultural, linguistic or other reasons, talk to the interpreter after you are finished talking with the other party or beforehand.

## **Professional interpreting**

Do not rely too much on friends or relatives of a non-English speaker who may speak both languages and can help with interpretation. If somebody speaks a foreign language it does not mean that he/she can interpret. One has to think in two languages at the same time and present the information in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner. Professional interpreting requires formal training and experience.

## **Interpreter's job**

Do not assume that interpreter can provide other services to a non-English speaker like giving a ride to him/her, calling somewhere on his/her behalf, etc. Interpreter's job is to interpret. Period. Interpreter is not a taxi driver or a dispatcher. Interpreters should not be asked to provide services on their own time.

## **Interpreting at a meeting**

If you need an interpreter for a full day meeting plan on 10 minutes breaks of every hour of interpretation to give the interpreter and your audience time to rest. During the breaks do not make the interpreter work, allow him/her to actually rest, get a drink, go to the bathroom, etc. If possible, have at least two interpreters available so that they can rotate during the day. When using simultaneous interpretation, interpreters are usually changed every 20 minutes.

## **Summary**

It is the interpreter's responsibility to do an excellent job for you. You, however, can assist the interpreter in many ways to do so. Both you and the interpreter should work together as partners in achieving the same goal. Remember, when your interpreter looks good, you look good too, and vice versa!