

# **How To Communicate Effectively Through Interpreters**

## **A Guide for Leaders**

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### **Insist That the Interpreter:**

- Speak in the first person.
- Remain in close proximity when you are speaking.
- Carry a notepad and take notes, as needed.
- Ask questions when not sure of a term, phrase, concept, acronym, etc.
- Project clearly and mirror both your vocal stresses and overall tone.
- Refrain from becoming engaged in a tangent dialogue with your audience/interlocutor(s), nor becoming an advocate or mediator in the dialogue; ideally, the interpreter should remain invisible.

### **As the Speaker, You Should:**

- Try to spend a little time with the interpreter before the event begins. The speaker and interpreter should not work together “cold.” The interpreter(s) will do a better job for you if there is already some rapport. For example, he/she will then feel more free to ask you about anything he/she does not understand.
- Always prepare the interpreter (in person) on the subject matter to be presented/discussed, and when possible, provide written text and/or supporting documents in advance of the interpreting session (this will further allow the interpreter to become familiar with your manner of speech and allow you to assess the interpreter’s overall competence).
- Ascertain the interpreter’s frame of reference and remain cognizant of his/her ability to deal with military concepts and terminology. Interpreters cannot know all terminology in all fields. Even the best of interpreters may be wholly ignorant of all things military, and the use of simple terms such as platoon, company, or battalion may leave him/her at a loss. The same applies for your audience/ interlocutor(s).
- Always advise the interpreter, in advance, of your audience/ interlocutor(s) by name and title/status.
- Maintain eye contact with your audience/interlocutor(s) at all times - not the interpreter! That is, talk to your audience/interlocutor, not to your interpreter.
- Speak in the first person.
- Try to speak in short thought groups, and pause for your interpreter to catch up. If you do not, you may force the interpreter to omit some of your words, but you won’t know which ones! Be concise and deliberate in your speech pattern, enunciate clearly, and agree in advance with the interpreter on the pace and pause intervals you will use. On the other hand, there is no need to use “Me Tarzan, You Jane” style sentences. Just be aware and allow time for the interpreting process.
- Refrain from using pedantic vocabulary, acronyms, idioms, slang, and jargon - keep it simple! See the next item.

- Especially avoid acronyms and insider jargon. Most likely, neither your interpreter nor your audience will understand them. While an acronym saves time for those who know it, in the foreign language it must be fully explained and translated. Often a “short” acronym stands for an entire concept that must be explained. Avoid acronyms.
- Be attuned to the flexibility an interpreter must be permitted to use in getting your meaning across to the audience/interlocutor(s), a flexibility that increases when the languages in use are from disparate families (e.g. English and Hungarian); this impacts greatly on the speed with which the interpreter can operate - don't rush him/her.
- Be constantly attuned to your audience/interlocutor(s)'s comprehension level - slow down, repeat, or elaborate as needed. Test them and the interpreter.
- Be attuned to the varieties, dialects, and/or multi-cultural sensitivities of certain languages and your interpreter's ability, or disability, to effectively reach your target audience (e.g. a Croatian national can certainly communicate with a Serbian audience, and a Palestinian can likewise speak with a Saudi, but neither would be the wisest choice of interpreters). Gender and generational differences are also a major consideration in some cultures.
- Plan on 10 minute breaks for every hour of interpretation to give both the interpreter and audience/interlocutor(s) time to rest, as well provide an opportunity for the interpreter to go over questions of vocabulary. During breaks, do not make the interpreter interpret – allow him or her to rest, get a drink, go to the bathroom. Also, be aware that in the evenings, when you are just relaxing over a drink or supper, your interpreter may still be working for you full time. Decide when you really need an interpreter and when you can let him/her rest. See the next item.
- Don't burn-out a good interpreter by over-dependence on just him/her - use other interpreters as available. If they are not as good, then help them to develop; if that fails - replace them. If possible, rotate interpreters a minimum of every two hours, or every 15-20 minutes when using simultaneous interpretation.
- Be aware that mealtime can be the most difficult time for an interpreter(s). Plan for seating arrangements that make the best use of your interpreter(s), and ensure your interpreter(s) is rotated out or given some free time - if not, he/she will not have the chance to eat.
- Don't distract the interpreter by passing notes, whispering, or carrying on side conversations.
- Visual aids - a picture is worth a thousand words - but rehearse and/or translate with the interpreter in advance.
- Beware of telling jokes. Unless you've rehearsed a joke or humorous comment with the interpreter ahead of time, don't use it - jokes rarely survive interpretation! The same applies for prayers and puns!
- Don't ever assume that your audience/interlocutor(s) is wholly ignorant of English and so refrain from unofficial comments to the interpreter along the lines of “Now don't interpret this, but...”
- Always take the time to provide your interpreter with feedback after the presentation/dialogue/meeting. Native English speakers are notorious for not correcting non-native speakers - be discrete in making corrections, but do make them.

### **Cautionary Notes:**

- Interpreting provides an immediate understanding of the spoken word in another

language - don't confuse it with translating, which deals with written texts. These are complementary skills, but quite different in their requisite techniques - translators rarely make for good interpreters and vice-versa.

- Being bilingual does not necessarily equate to being an effective interpreter. Both interpreting and translating require formal training (which is rare - few institutions teach these skills, and there are no national nor international standards of accreditation) and/or years of experience.
- Interpreting may be simultaneous or consecutive. Simultaneous interpretation is the oral, concurrent translation of a speaker's words from one language into another - usually via an audio/headphone system - as most commonly used in conferences. Consecutive interpretation, on the other hand, is most commonly used in meetings and dialogues, whereby the speaker(s) pauses between complete thoughts, sentences, or paragraphs for the interpreter to interpret (Consecutive interpretation is the preferred method of the U.S. State Department and is the method for which these guidelines are most applicable).
- Cultural awareness and sensitivity - both you and the interpreter must stay attuned to this, but don't fall prey to condescension.
- If consecutive interpreting is to be used, then you will need to double the amount of time you would need if speaking only in English — plan accordingly.
- Finally, if your interpreter doesn't look good, you don't look good. While it is his/her responsibility to do an excellent job for you, be aware of ways in which you can assist him/her in doing so.