

# Simultaneous Translation Tips

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## 1 Salesian translation and interpretation

It is good to be upfront about all this. There is quite a difference between ‘translation’ and ‘interpretation’. In many cases, in a Salesian event (chapter, team visit, other international gathering) there is a combination of translation (dealing with a written text) and interpretation (where you have no written text or where the speaker has one but liberally departs from it - as

is regularly the case if the Rector Major is speaking, since he likes to speak ‘off the cuff’).

Let’s assume people know how to handle ‘translation’. It is the pure ‘interpretation’ or combined ‘translation-interpretation’ that need to occupy us here.

There are three settings, and the technique needs to adapt to each of them:

a. you have a booth (soundproofed). This is the most helpful circumstance, since it keeps distraction to a minimum

b. you are in the crowd, but the speaker pauses for you to interpret/translate (a rare circumstance, since most speakers are unaccustomed to keeping their material well-punctuated with pauses; they simply go on and on)

c. whisper-interpretation. No booth but you are detached a little from the crowd and can interpret in a low voice. This might be the most common circumstance you encounter.

In ALL cases, you should request the possibility to have visual contact with the speaker. It makes the world of difference to your task.

## **2 What do you physically need?**

The essentials are: headphones, microphone, (carafe of water). Avoid lightweight “walkman” type headphones like the plague, if that’s possible (I always feel happier with the heavier, early ‘70s stereo equipment type): you want to concentrate on the speaker’s voice, not yours. The phones should also have their own volume control for you to adjust: some people shout, others whisper. And I always insist on being able to see whoever’s talking (through the booth window or on a monitor), so I can see whether his tongue’s in his cheek before I put my foot in it, so to speak.

## **3 How a simultaneous interpreter works**

It is really quite a complex process to actually interpret (meaning not read from a text but interpret ideas orally), one that only very few interpreters can handle well. A speaker is speaking, and that speaker does not stop or pause. He keeps talking. Therefore the interpreter must do the following while the speaker is talking:

- listen to what the speaker is saying

- translate it in his mind,
- render the translation in his microphone, and
- (and this is the most difficult part) at the same time listen to what is being said while he is speaking himself.

This requires a kind of mental miracle, and that is why it is an unusually demanding and complex activity to carry out, one that requires an unusual level of concentration, which tires out the interpreter rather soon - which affects his concentration which, in turn, affects his performance after a while, and ... well, you get the picture.

## 4 Tips for those unaccustomed to this exercise

It actually helps, if you are not practised at this, to try it out with someone beforehand, maybe a confrere who is happy to give you 15 minutes of practice in a not-so-embarrassing tete-a-tete! Or failing that practice shadowing the news in, say, English, and then shadowing and/or interpreting the news from language X by listening to the X station.

Try the following and see if they are helpful:

**I**n advance familiarize yourself with the topic of the talk

**N**ote down main points of the talk - it'll help you when interpreting

**T**ranslate and clarify the meaning of special terms and key words prior to interpreting

**E**stablish friendly relations between you and the speaker; if you already know his speaking style it helps you

**R**emember to pronounce words distinctly and clearly

**P**roduce a brief summary at the end of the talk - it helps to clarify conclusions, deal with questions in the audience

**R**eact quickly and be ready to work under pressure

**E**njoy what you are doing ...:-) there won't be a second chance

**T**ransmit a clear message to the target audience

Worry about meaning, not words (forget literal translation when interpreting), and even let the speaker go on a bit before attempting your translation. You will miss words, but you will be better able to translate ideas.

Inevitably there will be words, sometimes in sequence, you didn't hear or didn't understand. Talk around them quickly, and don't lose your thread. Bluff. Repeat the last thing you understood in slightly different words. Catch up with the speaker when you can follow him again. Just keep talking and

remain coherent. He who panics is lost. In general, look out for the points the guy wants to get across. Keep a steady flow of words, and don't waste time fumbling for the perfect one. Try to find a delay that is comfortable for you.

## **5 You also have an educational role towards the speaker!**

Don't hesitate to point out (and then remind) people responsible for the meeting how THEY have to act - it is not all up to you! You could consider giving everyone the following list - in writing, beforehand. Let them be aware that you are working your butt off to help them!

### **5.1 Speak slowly, and...**

...Pause between sentences, and/or after you've made a point.

==> Especially if you are reading your presentation. Interpreters cannot "think up" words and appropriate expressions in the target language as fast as you can pronounce them.

They may need to use more words than you to express the same thing, especially if you've had time to review and polish your speech, and they are doing it in a split second. They will need time to catch up with what you are saying, and can only do so when you pause.

### **5.2 Beware of your accent. Try to speak in as neutral an accent as possible, and/or slow down.**

==> Whether you are a native speaker of English (or French, or Portuguese...) or not, your interpreters might have difficulties if they can't understand your accent. They may be from a different area, or a different English (or other)-speaking country, or they may themselves be non-native speakers of English (or other).

### **5.3 Check with the interpreters all throughout during the presentation.**

==> Make sure everything is fine (the speed of your delivery, the sound system, ...) You can

- a) look at them in the booth and/or

b) ask them directly: they hear you! Remember to do so regularly during the whole presentation.

#### **5.4 Speak loudly, clearly, and close to the microphone.**

==> Make sure your interpreters can hear you well. If you don't have a lapel mike, and move away from the podium, chances are they will not be able to hear and understand what you are saying, and will not be able to translate anymore. Often happens at the Pisana, unfortunately!

#### **5.5 Repeat questions from the audience.**

==> Interpreters cannot hear the audience, and will not be able to translate the question to the rest of the non-English speaking audience, or simply might not be able to understand your answer.

Even if there is a microphone in the audience, it might be difficult for the interpreters to hear it.

#### **5.6 Remember these guidelines throughout the whole presentation.**

==> Once you are caught in the delivery of your presentation, it is very natural to not remember these guidelines. Do consider adding flags at regular intervals in your notes to remind you of them.

("INTERPRETERS?!", or "SLOW DOWN!" in red in the margin at the bottom of each note page, for example.)