

# TIPS FOR COMMUNITY INTERPRETERS

- Be familiar with the terminology that will be used. Advance preparation is key!
- Explain how interpretation works before you actually start doing it.
- Speak in first person. Instead of "He says..." you should say "I..."
- Honor the confidentiality of all communications
- Paraphrasing is NOT interpreting.
- When doing consecutive interpretation make sure the person you are interpreting for does not speak for long periods of time without allowing time for the interpretation to happen. Jump in and interrupt if necessary. Otherwise you will end up paraphrasing.
- Remember that interpreters serve as a conduit of communication and you should not interfere by adding or subtracting from the speaker's message.
- While interpreting you should not intervene to give your input, ideas or advocate for any of the parties. Keep your advocating and interpreting role as clear and separated as possible.
- Make sure the communication is established between the parties and not between *you* and the parties. Interpreting in a social justice context is about empowering people and helping them establish a direct relationship with others who do not speak the same language.
- An interpreter is never the "main character," but rather works behind the scenes to help establish a relationship across cultural and language barriers. Be careful not to be the "savior."
- Be sensitive to cultural differences.
- Be fluent in both the source and target language.
- Remember that in medical and legal situation that there is a lot at stake and doing a good interpretation job is vital. If you feel you are not prepared enough to interpret effectively look for other people who could do it for you.
- Maintain and expand on your interpreting skills.



## QUICK INTRO FOR INTERPRETING

The following quick orientation to interpreting should take less than 2 minutes to do with the group, and should be done right at the very beginning. It is only sample text, and can be changed to fit groups' needs.

"We want to let y'all know that we are interpreting between Spanish and English today. This is because we have speakers of these two languages with us (at least these two!) and we want to encourage everyone to feel confident and at ease to participate using the words that are most meaningful to them.

We believe that the language we use is intimately connected with who we are, our thoughts, our emotions, our dreams, our cultures, our passions, our politics... everything. We are interpreting these sessions in English and Spanish to help create an inclusive space where each of us may feel free to bring our whole selves into the room.

To make the interpreting as inclusive for everyone as possible, we want to ask folks to please keep the following in mind:

1. Speak at a moderate pace, not too fast nor too slow.
2. Speak in a loud voice, so you can be heard clear across the room.
3. Speak directly to your fellow participants, no need to look at the interpreters.
4. One person talk at a time, interpreters can't choose which one to interpret for.
5. For bilingual folks, please feel free to switch languages as much as you like, but please not within the same sentence. (this is meant to be humorous!)
6. For those using equipment: if there is any trouble with the equipment or its batteries, please come over and get a different set as soon as you notice the problem (please don't suffer in silence!)

7. When you yourself are talking, it's often helpful to pull your earphones off, or turn down the volume, so the interpreter's voice in your ear won't distract you.

8. The language in which the conversation is occurring can switch at any moment, and we want folks to feel at ease to speak in whichever language they want. If the discussion flows into a language that you don't need interpreted, it's fine to turn the volume down, but please keep the earphones close by and ready, should the language suddenly switch again. This is so we don't make any one feel "on the spot" for switching languages, and cause us to go scrambling for our headphones and lose momentum because we weren't ready for it.

9. At the end of the day and during breaks, please turn off the equipment to save the batteries.

IF FOLKS START TALKING TOO FAST OR TOO QUIETLY, WE LIKE TO USE SOME HAND SIGNALS TO LET FOLKS KNOW TO SLOW DOWN OR SPEAK UP. USUALLY WE DO THIS:

<<< >>> (demonstrate a hand signal for "SLOW DOWN")

^^ (demonstrate a hand signal for "SPEAK UP")

ARE THESE HAND SIGNALS THAT ARE OK WITH Y'ALL TO USE? (If not, ask the group to agree on their own hand signals)

IF THE INTERPRETER STARTS MAKING THESE HAND SIGNALS AND THE SPEAKER DOESN'T NOTICE, BUT OTHER FOLKS IN THE GROUP SEE IT, CAN WE AGREE AS A GROUP TO HELP OUT BY DOING THE HAND SIGNAL, TOO? (hopefully they say 'Yes!')

ARE THERE ANY QUESTIONS? (answer, thank everyone, and continue with workshop)

1. 在“研究”中，  
 2. 首先，我们必须  
 3. 明确我们的研究目的。  
 4. 其次，我们要收集  
 5. 必要的材料。

6. 然后，我们将进行  
 7. 详细的分析。最后，  
 8. 我们将得出结论。

9. 以上是我的研究  
 10. 报告。

11. 我希望这能帮助你  
 12. 了解我的研究。

13. 谢谢你的时间和  
 14. 耐心。

15. 祝你工作顺利！

16. 你的朋友，  
 17. 张三

18. 这是我的研究  
 19. 报告。

20. 我完成了我的  
 21. 研究。

22. 我很高兴能和你  
 23. 分享我的研究。

24. 希望这对你有  
 25. 帮助。

From the ATA Interpreters Division website:  
<http://www.ata-divisions.org/ID/>

## TIPS FOR CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS

The conference interpreter must base their interpreting ability on total fluency in both the source and target languages.

The conference interpreter must be able to simultaneously listen to the speaker's comments, analyze their message, understand their meaning and present it in the target language, all while listening to the ensuing comments.

The conference interpreter must have an in depth knowledge of the subject matter in order to effectively interpret terminology specific to the nature of the topic in both the source and target languages.

The conference interpreter must meet the challenge of conveying the meaning including the subtlety inherent to a speaker's presentation.

The conference interpreter must accurately communicate the nuances, expressions and dynamics of the culture.

The conference interpreter must have the ability to work at a high level of concentration.

The interpreter must have the ability to sight translate the prepared text of the speaker which tends to contain long and complex sentences.

The conference interpreter must maintain their skill and familiarity with terminology through research and on going training.

From the ATA Interpreters Division website: <http://www.ata-divisions.org/ID/>

## **TIPS FOR MEDICAL INTERPRETERS**

**The medical interpreter must have thorough knowledge of medical terminology in both the target and source languages.**

**The medical interpreter must be completely familiar with medical procedures and the roles of doctors and the hospital staff.**

**The medical interpreter must have an ability to easily interpret what is being said in a clear and understandable manner.**

**The medical interpreter must never add nor subtract from what is communicated by anyone.**

**When the medical interpreter is bridging a cultural disparity and advocating completeness of information, we must be sensitive to the patient as well as to the information needs of the medical staff.**

**When the medical interpreter is going to be drawing on their cultural knowledge to assist their approach to a patient, it is essential that they remember that each situation is unique and they must not depend on cultural stereotypes.**

**When the medical interpreter is bridging a cultural disparity and advocating completeness of information, we must have prior knowledge and approval of the medical staff or caregiver group.**

## Just a word in your ear

Please make sure that your microphone is switched on before you begin to speak.

As the microphones are highly sensitive, please refrain from tapping them and brushing documents against them.

If you are not using your headset, please turn the volume right down.

Please speak into the microphone at a distance of about 40 cm and do not turn away.

If at all possible, please give each interpreters' booth a copy of any text you intend to read well in advance. Please bear in mind that the simultaneous translation of a written text is a process far more complex than the interpretation of a speech made freely from notes.

If you must read a text, try to ensure that your delivery is natural - a text read at top speed to fit into allotted speaking time is very difficult to follow, even for your fellow countrymen.

Please give the exact reference of any text you wish to quote.

If you are quoting figures, please adopt a slower pace and enunciate as clearly as possible.

When you are chairing a meeting, please allow a pause at the end of each intervention before giving the floor to the next speaker.

Thank you for your comprehension,

The interpreters.

From the European Parliament Interpreter Directorate,  
which now covers interpretation in 23 languages for the EP.  
This is the interpretation tips page for speakers in  
European Parliament meetings.  
(note added by Alice Johnson)

**Simultaneous Interpretation Training for Social Justice Interpreters  
May 14-16, 2004 at the Highlander Center, New Market, TN**

Various websites with information about interpreting trainings, associations, glossaries online,  
This is not an exhaustive list; please use it as a starting point for further research.

**Some training programs**

<http://www.xculture.org/training/overview/interpreter/programs.html>

**Bridging the Gap, Medical Interpreter Training from the Cross Cultural Health Care Program**

<http://www.nccourts.org/Citizens/CPrograms/Foreign/Default.asp>

**NC Court Interpreter Certification Program**

<http://www.tsc.state.tn.us/geninfo/Programs/Interpreters/Interpreters.htm>

**TN Court Interpreter Certification Program**

<http://www.foreignlanguages.org/>

**Tennessee Foreign Language Institute, organizes many courses in interpretation.**

**Some associations**

<http://www.tapit.org/>

**Tennessee Association of Professional Interpreters and Translators**

<http://www.catiweb.org/>

**Carolina Association of Translators and Interpreters**

<http://www.atanet.org/>

**American Translators Association**

<http://www.najit.org/>

**National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators**

<http://www.aiic.net/>

**International Association of Conference Interpreters, has various articles about interpreting.**

**Some online glossary sites**

<http://unterm.un.org/>

**United Nations Glossary of Terms used in UN conferences**

<http://www.proz.com/>

**Freelance translator website for sharing resources, glossaries, and job information**

<http://www.proz.com/?sp=about/kudoz>

**Kudoz, a term search program of proz.com, translators ask and answer questions about specific term translation questions. Software allows for personal glossary development and storage.**



## Some Tips for Successful Interpretation at Meetings and Events

*Prepared by Alice Johnson for the BRIDGE Curriculum*

- Prepare your interpreter about terminology before the meeting. Be sure to check in with interpreters about the subject matter of the event so they can familiarize themselves with relevant vocabulary. Make sure that the interpreter receives in advance copies of materials to be used in the meeting to review in preparation for interpreting. An ethical interpreter will also let you know immediately if the subject matter is out of their scope of knowledge.
- Interpreters should work in pairs. In the meeting itself, interpreters should be contracted to work in pairs, alternating every 20-30 minutes. This is part of what makes interpreting so costly, as each interpreter is paid an hourly or daily rate. Be advised that any knowledgeable and ethical interpreter will avoid, if not flatly refuse, an interpreting assignment without a co-interpreter.
- Conduct a brief interpretation orientation with participants before starting a meeting. The agenda should allow the interpreters to give a brief orientation covering how the interpreting will work, how the audio equipment works, where to go for technical difficulties, establish some hand signals for the interpreters to request folks to talk louder, or slow down, and answer any initial questions.
- Interpreters should never participate in the meeting! No matter how tense or chaotic the discussion, the interpreter must simply render what's being said into the other language, without interrupting, editing, or adding anything.
- Interpreters should honor the message of participants. When interpreting, interpreters render everything in the same voice as the speaker, in first person. In addition, interpreters must interpret absolutely everything that the speaker says. It can be useful to have a bilingual person monitoring the interpreter for completeness and accuracy.
- Be clear about fees and payment beforehand. Interpreters usually serve as independent contractors and will need to submit an invoice with their tax information. While interpreting costs may seem extremely expensive for a small organization, the success of a multilingual gathering will only be as good as its interpreters. Poor, or unskilled volunteer interpreters can ruin an otherwise well-planned event.
- Designate an "equipment techie" to monitor equipment used by the participants, facilitators, and interpreters. It is useful to have a "techie" to hand out and collect equipment for the session, and to observe the group and watch for folks who are fiddling with their equipment and looking "lost," then go offer them fresh receivers, etc.
- Replace your batteries. Most interpretation equipment takes 9Volt batteries, which last roughly 8-16 hours in the devices. A tip: the battery that needs changing most often will be the interpreter transmitter!
- Conduct an in-room sound check before the event. "Techies" should test the equipment to see if new batteries are needed, or to determine if the room has spots in the room where the transmission of the interpreting equipment does not work.
- Love and care for interpreters. Make sure that interpreters have access to water and snacks (and restrooms when possible). If they are to interpret through a "working lunch," time should be planned in for them to eat, too. In gatherings with overnight stays, it's a good idea to put the interpreters in single, quiet rooms as even mild sleep deprivation can significantly lower an interpreter's performance during the day, and jeopardize the success of the meeting.

## **Planning a multilingual Event or Meeting – in a Social Justice Context**

### **Check List To be used by Event planners as well as interpreters**

#### **Agenda:**

- Know the agenda (how many concurrent sessions, breakouts plenary, etc)
- Presenters know how interpretation works
- Agenda has enough breaks so interpreters can rest.
- Know how many participants speak what languages
- Know what mode of interpretation is going to be used (Consecutive, Simultaneous and/or relay)

#### **Equipment:**

- Batteries are working in all devices
- Transmitter has new batteries
- All rooms are checked for static problems (Well before the day of the event)
- Count total number of receivers before they are given to participants
- Have an "interpretation station" set up
- Have a plan for how to quickly hand out and return equipment
- Have a person designated to look after the equipment (especially when using more than 30 devices)
- Have a form for people to fill out when receiving the equipment. When having more than 30 participants is recommended to get a form of ID from participants or signatures
- If you do not own the equipment make sure you have a contract for the equipment rental or any other type of agreement.

#### **Orientation (This is the first thing that needs to be done at the event or meeting)**

- Have a list with orientation points. See Attached document.
- Talk about language and power. Explain that sometimes English speakers get tired of or "forget" their equipment. Remind them that this is making a choice not to hear the voices of speakers of other languages. ( social justice settings mainly)
- Stress the importance of commitment from all participants. Having a successful multilingual event is everybody's responsibility ( social justice settings mainly)

#### **Interpreters**

- Interpreters have experience working in a multilingual event (in social justice type of work setting if possible). If not, it is recommended to do an orientation with them about the work that you do.
- Interpreters have done simultaneous interpretation before.
- Interpreters "know their rights": Break every thirty minutes; have a co-interpreter; use signals, etc.
- Interpreters are familiar with the equipment and know how it works and how to solve common problems
- Interpreters received written materials in advance and have copies at the event
- Interpreters are familiar with Language and terminology to be used at the meeting

## **9.6 New Study on Fatigue Confirms Need for Working in Teams**

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The practice of having simultaneous interpreters work in teams of two during lengthy assignments, although standard procedure in all other forums requiring interpretation, has never been universally accepted by the courts. In most state and many federal courts, it is simply not done. Attempts by interpreters to institute the policy have met with resistance from judges who consider it wasteful and administrators who cite budgetary constraints. But a study recently conducted at the University of Geneva has contributed important new information on the subject: its findings provide further scientific evidence to support the position that accuracy is directly related to the length of time that a person interprets.

The study by Barbara Moser-Mercer and her colleagues (forthcoming) at the University of Geneva's *École de Traduction et d'Interprétation* constitutes the first part of a two-part study on stress and fatigue in conference interpreting. Its aim is to examine the fatigue factor during extended turns, as well as the coping behavior of interpreters when under stress. The subjects—five native English-speakers working from German into English, whose professional experience ranged from 12 to 25 years in the booth—were told to work until they could no longer provide acceptable quality. During the first 30 minutes the frequency of errors—as measured with an elaborate error scale—rose steadily. The interpreters, however, “appeared to be unaware of this decline in quality,” according to the report, as most of them continued on task for another 30 minutes.

The error scale included several different categories by which quality can be determined. “Looking at the total number of errors,” the report states, “we can see that the frequency increases from three minutes to 30 minutes.” The category of most serious errors, i.e., errors in meaning, rose consistently with increased time on task. At 60 minutes, all subjects combined committed a total of 32.5 meaning errors. “Considering that each meaning error, no matter how minor, does distort the message, a considerable increase in the number of meaning errors after 30 minutes on task does represent a significant decline in output quality,” the authors argue. In the category of nonsense, the number of errors committed by the subjects almost doubled after 30 minutes on task—from 4.5 after 15 minutes to 8.5.

Moser-Mercer and her colleagues conclude:

The increase in the number of meaning errors combined with the interpreters' lack of awareness of this drastic decrease in quality shed some light on the validity of interpreters' judgement of their own output quality [...] This lack of judgement appears to be the result of cognitive overload: a situation in which the interpreter tries to economize on processing capacity and allocate resources only to those parts of the interpreting process that will ensure continuous output (irrespective of the quality provided) [...] We can conclude from this that shorter turns do indeed preserve a high level of quality, but that interpreters cannot necessarily be trusted to make the right decision with regard to optimum time on task.

This is an important insight, since many interpreters, fearful of not getting work or of exposing what is erroneously perceived as a weakness, will insist that they can work for extended periods of time without any adverse consequences to accuracy. It also shows that some courts beg the question: if interpreters themselves are unable to judge the length of time beyond which the quality of their performance declines significantly, how can anyone else have the power to decide how long an interpreter should work without relief?

An additional conclusion reached by the University of Geneva team concerned the subjects' emotional response to increased time on task. “Interpreters seem to experience an increase in stress during the first 30 minutes, as indicated by a rise in cortisol levels, but with task overload respond with an ‘I couldn't care less’ feeling,” they report, adding: “This is borne out by anecdotal evidence according to which interpreters try to deflect responsibility for the quality of output when they consider the demands to be unrealistic; this would include increased time on task, extremely fast speakers, and long working hours.” Every court interpreter, no matter how experienced, would undoubtedly corroborate this finding.

### **Stress investigated among UN interpreters**

H. McIlvaine Parsons, a fellow at the Institute for Behavioral Research, in Silver Spring, MD, reached similar conclusions in a consultation he conducted in 1975 for the United Nations. The study was part of an investigation

that followed a job action in which UN interpreters stayed away from their jobs for one day to protest "working hours and the stress and tension they said resulted from working more than seven half-day sessions per week." McIlvaine Parson's objective was in part to "create a wider understanding than there seemed to be of the interpretation process. If some of these factors could be ameliorated," he argues, "the interpreters might experience less stress and tension and they might be less likely to avoid that stress and tension by failing to come to work."

McIlvaine Parsons reported that "the interpreters were emphatic that more than three hours in a booth [taking turns with a colleague] resulted in excessive stress and tension, especially compared with a shorter time." Other factors rated by the subjects as stressful or extremely stressful included: the speaker talking very fast, lack of clarity or coherence by the speaker, the need for intense concentration, inexperience with the subject matter, a speaker's accent, long speaker utterances between pauses, background noise in the meeting room, and mispositioning of the speaker's microphone relative to the speaker. All of these would be equally applicable to court interpreters.

As a result of his study, McIlvaine Parsons recommended to the UN Secretariat "that a simultaneous interpreter should not be required to work more than three half-day sessions in succession." It should be borne in mind that UN interpreters work in teams of two at all times. Skeptics might be inclined to argue that these studies do not refer specifically to interpreters who work in court and are therefore not applicable to this sector. A comparison of court and conference interpreting, however, can easily demonstrate that the former is in fact more demanding and stressful than the latter.

### **What is fatigue?**

Although the definition of the word fatigue seems obvious, there is considerable confusion among the general public and the legal profession about its meaning and consequences in a courtroom setting. Fatigue for interpreters is not primarily physical, as in the case of athletes, whose muscles become strained after sustained exertion: it is mental fatigue. It results from complex mental processing and the high degree of concentration the interpreter must have to hear, then understand, analyze and finally express ideas coherently in another language. "Most people do not realize that an interpreter uses at least 22 cognitive skills when interpreting," states Patricia Michelsen in an article published in The Court Management and Administration Report. Other studies of simultaneous interpretation have shown that fatigue is exacerbated by environmental factors that interfere with various aspects of the cognitive process.

Taking into consideration both cognitive processes and environmental interference, the degree of concentration required of an interpreter is many times greater than that of any other person in a courtroom. In a 1995 study on fidelity assessment in consecutive interpretation, Daniel Gile reports that a group of subjects asked to rate an interpretation "were found to be unreliable fidelity assessors: they did not detect all interpretation errors on the one hand, and imagined errors that had not been made by the interpreter on the other." This is not surprising to interpretation teachers, according to Gile, since "ordinary listening entails too much loss, and [...] interpreters have to listen to speakers with much more concentration than is usual in everyday life."

While conference interpreters must cope with the stress generated by the job's cognitive demands, their booth-enclosed environment is relatively stress-free compared to a courtroom setting. As Michelsen indicates, "Conference interpreters work under better conditions: they concentrate on only one speaker at a time, often have a prepared text of the speech ahead of time, address the audience in only one level of rhetoric, and usually do not have audibility problems."

### **Environmental factors and loss of accuracy**

Audibility is one of the key factors contributing to the stress suffered by court interpreters. In 1974, an enlightening study on the effects of noise on the performance of simultaneous interpreters was conducted by David Gerver, then at the University of Durham, Great Britain. He found that, as the listening conditions deteriorated, significantly more errors were committed by the subjects when interpreting than when shadowing (repeating a spoken text in the same language).

This finding, according to Gerver, "suggested that difficulty in perceiving source language passages reduced the ability of simultaneous interpreters to monitor their own interpretations into the target language." He added that other studies indicated that "levels of noise which would not necessarily impair perception of speech by simultaneous conference interpreters could interfere with the processes involved in the retrieval and transformation of the messages being interpreted." Listening conditions are most relevant to any discussion of interpreter stress and fatigue. Since monitoring their own utterances and making corrections is one of the many cognitive functions performed by interpreters, if their ability to self-correct is impaired, their level of stress and resulting fatigue also increase proportionately. "It is perhaps not surprising," Gerver comments, "that simultaneous interpreters are particularly sensitive to environmental noise and that they will often refuse to work in conditions which, to the observer at least, do not appear particularly stressful."

While Gerver's study was conducted with a monitored increase in noise level, the same conclusions would apply to a situation in which the interpreter is simply unable to hear, as too often occurs in the courtroom. Given that acoustic impairments cause conference interpreters stress and fatigue, we can safely conclude that court interpreters are at a distinctly greater disadvantage acoustically, and therefore subjected to even more severe stress. Unlike conference interpreters, who work in soundproof booths and hear the sound through headphones connected to a stationary microphone, court interpreters hear telegraphic, often-interrupted messages from speakers distributed throughout the courtroom. Although many courts have microphones, they are not multi-directional and often distort the sound more than they amplify it. The interpreter must then filter this message through myriad other noises polluting the audible space, such as telephones ringing, jurors coughing, babies crying in the gallery, and so on. The best kept secret in the courtroom may well be that interpreters are often unable to hear what they are expected to interpret. When interpreting simultaneously into a microphone, they are invariably made to position themselves at the point furthest away from the witness stand, so as not to disturb jurors and those testifying. When no simultaneous equipment is available, the interpreter is obliged to sit next to the defendant—the hardest place from which to hear the proceedings. (By contrast, court reporters are granted the choice spot in the well of the courtroom to maximize their ability to hear every word uttered.) Moreover, no one seems to realize that the interpreter's hearing is further obstructed by the sound of his or her own voice overlapping the original speaker's at all times, creating an additional acoustical impediment. The bolder or more experienced interpreters will interrupt to insist that the parties speak up or rearrange themselves to improve audibility. But courtroom atmospheres are not always conducive to intransigence on the part of someone who is supposed to be invisible and unobtrusive, and even well-meaning judges and court clerks often have little or no control over antiquated sound systems or acoustically faulty architecture.

All of the factors found by the various studies described here to be major causes of conference interpreter stress and fatigue—acoustics, prolonged periods on task, lack of familiarity with relevant terminology, excessively fast or incoherent speakers, etc.—are in fact more applicable to interpreters in court than in any other setting. Moreover, judiciary interpreters have the additional pressure of knowing that nothing less than the life and liberty of human beings are at stake in the proceedings they are called upon to duplicate in a defendant's native tongue. The awareness that each word mistranslated or omitted hinders the non-English speakers' ability to follow the proceedings against them is a constant source of tension. Whereas the conference setting allows for much more flexibility, interpreting in court requires greater precision, since a complete and faithful rendition must include hesitations, false starts, repetitions and inaccuracies. It follows then that judiciary interpreters face more demanding and stressful working conditions than their counterparts elsewhere.

#### **Studies corroborate empirical evidence**

While these studies make an important contribution to the body of scientific data needed for a better understanding of the interpreting process and its complexities, they merely corroborate what practicing interpreters have known and argued all along: that work quality—i.e., accuracy and coherence—begins to deteriorate after approximately 30 minutes of sustained simultaneous interpreting, and that the only way to ensure a faithful rendition of legal proceedings is to provide interpreters with adequate relief at approximately half-hour intervals.

Conscientious administrators in several federal courts, the United Nations and the U.S. State Department recognized the need for tandem interpreting and adopted the practice early on. Team interpreting, in fact, dates back to the Nuremberg trials. At the State Department, which according to Harry Obst, Director of the Office of Language Services, handles 200 to 300 interpreting missions in 100 different locations per day, it is considered an inviolable policy. In response to a request from Ed Baca of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Obst pointed out that "The policy on simultaneous interpreters is simple and corresponds to that of all other responsible interpreting services in the entire world (United Nations, European Commission, International Red Cross, International Court of Justice, foreign ministries in other nations.) No individual simultaneous interpreter is allowed to work for more than 30 minutes at a time." The letter continues, "This is also done for the protection of the users. After 30 minutes the accuracy and completeness of simultaneous interpreters decrease precipitously, falling off by about 10% every 5 minutes after holding a satisfactory plateau for half an hour." The reason, Obst explains, is that "The human mind cannot hold the needed level of focused concentration any longer than that. This fact has been demonstrated in millions of hours of simultaneous interpretation around the world since 1948. It is not a question of opinion. It is simply the result of empirical observation."

Echoing the results of the University of Geneva study, Obst adds that although some interpreters believe they can interpret longer than that, they do so because after 30 minutes "they can no longer differentiate between interpreting the original message or just babbling in the target language. Their mind is too tired to evaluate their own performance." The policy on the part of court administrators that interpreters work for an hour or more without relief, says Obst, "makes sense only in budgetary terms. It makes reliable interpreting impossible and denies the client who has to rely on the interpreter the due process that every person is entitled to under our laws."

And that is precisely the point. Unlike their colleagues in any other sector, judiciary interpreters are placed under oath to "truly and accurately interpret" the proceedings. Accuracy in a legal context is not an academic concept or an abstraction that can be quantified in relative terms. It is the cornerstone that guarantees limited-English litigants equality under the law. That was the spirit of the Court Interpreters Act enacted in 1978. It is also the spirit of the Code of Professional Responsibility drafted by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, which compels interpreters to "fulfill a special duty to interpret accurately and faithfully" and "perform to the best of their ability to assure due process for the parties" and "refuse any assignment [...] under conditions which substantially impair their effectiveness." If interpreters are to be expected to comply with these canons, they will need the full support of administrators in both the state and federal courts, who will place due process considerations above the temptation to trim their budgets at the expense of those who come before the bar of justice.

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