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BEST PRACTICES IN THE INTERPRETING PROFESSION SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING IN NON-CONFERENCE SETTINGS

InterpretAmerica seeks to raise the profile of interpreting to the benefit all. To that end, we offer periodic Statements of Best Practices as a contribution to help guide the field in establishing and following practices that promote the highest level of professional conduct in all settings where interpreting is needed.

Summary:

Demand for simultaneous interpreting is expanding into settings outside of traditional conference interpreting venues, such as courtrooms, schools, hospitals and social service organizations. However, existing best practice guidelines primarily cover diplomatic and international venues, where there is sufficient infrastructure to ensure good working conditions in compliance with those guidelines. This document provides suggested best practice guidelines that adhere to the high quality standards developed for traditional conference interpreting and which have been adapted to the unique requirements and constraints of the non-conference setting.

Definition:

Simultaneous interpreting is the rendering of a spoken or signed language (the source language) into another (the target language) where the speaker and interpreter speak concurrently. Research has established that it is a complex cognitive ability that is predominantly meaning based and not a simple transcoding of words from one language to another.¹ When done properly, it is a true and accurate rendition in the target language of the message originally expressed in the source language, “without omissions or embellishments so that the parties can understand one another quickly.”²

¹ Russo, Mariachiara. 2011. “Simultaneous Interpreting,” in *Handbook of Translation Studies 2010*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

² “Modes of Interpreting: Simultaneous, Consecutive, & Sight Translation” NAJIT Position Paper, http://www.najit.org/publications/Modes_of_Interpreting200609.pdf.



Background:

Simultaneous interpreting was pioneered in the 1920s in conjunction with the advent of sound transmission equipment (e.g. headphones, microphones, and sound isolation booths), which made it possible for interpreters to listen to a speaker and interpret simultaneously what was being said without interrupting the meeting or distracting participants. First used extensively at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunals shortly after World War II, this pairing of simultaneous interpreting with sound transmission equipment allowed participants to select their language of preference and listen to proceedings in real-time regardless of the language being spoken during the hearings.

These highly publicized trials are generally considered the birthplace of modern simultaneous interpreting. In the intervening years, best practices for when, where, and how to employ the simultaneous mode have been developed mostly within the context of conference interpreting, specifically for diplomatic and international meeting venues.

Since that time, the interpreting profession, through both research and practice, has identified a set of complex cognitive and public speaking skills required to interpret proficiently. While high levels of aural comprehension and oral fluency in at least two languages serve as the baseline requirement for pursuing this profession, they are not clear indicators of an individual's ability to interpret. Professional interpreters possess a finely honed set of skills that include active listening, speech analysis, multitasking and memory, to understand completely and accurately what is said in the source language and then deliver that message in a clear, understandable way in the target language.

The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) has developed and upheld stringent professional standards and working conditions that allow for the most effective use of simultaneous while ensuring interpreter health and well-being.³ These best practices take into account not only what professional interpreters need in order to perform simultaneous interpretation successfully, but also what the listener needs to be able to hear and comprehend speech that is interpreted using this mode. The basic setup is described as follows:

In simultaneous mode, the interpreter sits in a booth with a clear view of the meeting room and the speaker and listens to and simultaneously interprets the speech into a target language. Simultaneous interpreting requires a booth (fixed or mobile) that meets ISO standards of acoustic isolation, dimensions, air quality and accessibility as well as appropriate equipment (headphones, microphones). (AIIC)⁴

³ "AIIC Professional Standards," Article 6, <http://aiic.net/page/205>

⁴ <http://aiic.net/page/1629>



Greater detail regarding AIIIC standards for simultaneous interpretation equipment can be found at <http://aiic.net/node/54/equipment-systems-standards>.

Expanded Professional Standards:

In a perfect world, these standards would be adhered to in all venues where simultaneous interpreting is required. However, globalization and other forces have led to increasing demand for professional interpreting services in almost every societal institution. As interpreting moves into these new areas, expanded best practice guidelines that adhere to the high quality standards developed for traditional conference interpreting need to be formulated and adapted to the unique requirements and constraints of each new setting.

Best Practices in Non-Conference Settings:

The United States is experiencing significant growth in demand for interpreting services in diverse settings, including boardrooms, courtrooms, medical facilities, educational institutions and other social service arenas. In fact, most interpreters in the United States work mainly in medical, judiciary and social service settings.⁵ In a recent study on the interpreting marketplace in North America, interpreters identified simultaneous as the mode they use most frequently, despite the lack of training and best practice guidelines for its use outside of traditional conference interpreting venues.⁶ The use of interpretation booths, fixed or portable, is not always feasible, which necessitates adapting existing guidelines for conference interpreting to the physical realities of these new environments, while respecting the purpose for which they were drafted—to ensure quality interpreting and the well-being of interpreters.

InterpretAmerica recommends the following *minimum* standards as necessary for providing adequate working conditions for interpreters working in simultaneous mode in settings where the use of fixed or portable booths is not feasible:

Duration

1. A single interpreter should not work in simultaneous mode for more than 30 minutes at a time.⁷
2. Ideally, if the interpreting session is for longer than 30 minutes, interpreters will work in a team of at least two, switching off after every 30 minutes.⁸

⁵ Kelly, Nataly, Stewart, Robert G. and Hegde, Vijayalaxmi. 2010. *The Interpreting Marketplace*. pp. 15-16.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For a detailed study of the effects of prolonged turns in simultaneous interpreting see: "Prolonged turns in interpreting: Effects on quality, physiological and psychological stress (Pilot study)" by Moser-Mercer, Barbara; Künzli, Alexander; Korac, Marina, *Interpreting*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1998, pp47-74, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

⁸ For an explanation of recommended arrangements for team interpreting in court proceedings, see *Fundamentals of Court Interpretation: Theory, Policy and Practice (Second Edition)* by González, Roseann D.; Vásquez, Victoria F.; Mikkelsen, Holly, 2012, Carolina Academic Press.



3. If team interpreting is not possible, the interpreter must be given breaks on a regular schedule (every 30 minutes) without fear of reprisals, either in the workplace or from the contracting language services agency. When simultaneous interpreting must be performed by a single interpreter, the interpreted interaction should be limited to no more than two hours, including breaks.

Sound Conditions

1. When possible, and particularly in court and other meeting rooms equipped with wireless assisted listening systems, interpreters should be provided with a direct audio feed and headphones.
2. When no assisted listening system is available, the speakers should at a minimum speak into a microphone, and the interpreters should be positioned in a place where they can easily hear and see the speakers.
3. The use of ambient, non-amplified sound for simultaneous interpreting represents a substandard practice that can result in errors in communication due to the interpreters not being able to hear the speaker's voice over their own interpretation. Put simply, if interpreters cannot hear, they cannot interpret.
4. Any setting where on-site simultaneous interpreting is required on a regular basis should make the necessary investments in equipment and facilities to ensure successful use of this mode of interpreting.

Conclusion:

Simultaneous interpreting can help streamline multilingual communication in a multitude of settings, thereby ensuring basic civil and human rights while at the same time saving time and resources. Entities and organizations seeking to implement the use of simultaneous interpreting to facilitate multilingual interaction should endeavor to provide the conditions necessary for interpreters to perform accurate, professional simultaneous interpreting and to ensure their well-being.

NOVEMBER 2012