

Using an Interpreter to Your Advantage

By Muramatsu Masumi

Having come to the last installment of this six-part series of essays reflecting on my experiences over forty years as a professional interpreter, I would now like to offer some practical advice on how you can use an interpreter to help you effectively overcome language and communication barriers.

My discussion is based on Japanese-English interpreting; however, I am certain it applies equally to other language combinations. And when I speak of an interpreter, I mean a professional one. If someone less than professional is the only option at hand, one would hope he or she at least aspires to be a professional.

A translator is, of course, a member of a different profession, the nature of whose work is quite dissimilar. An interpreter changes one spoken language into another verbally. A translator does the same but in written form. The former, whether doing consecutive or simultaneous interpreting, performs his or her task instantaneously, while the latter takes time to produce results.

When to use an interpreter

Obviously you need the help of an interpreter if you do not have a good command of the other language, Japanese in this case. And you must really have an excellent knowledge of it if the business at stake is of importance to you. As the old Japanese proverb warns, "A half-learned martial art can cause serious injury."

We are not talking here about an exchange of pleasantries or enjoying your role as tourist exploring an exotic environment. When the subject to be discussed is an important piece of business, a serious matter of state or public affairs, or a point of contention of a philosophical nature, for example, you should secure the services of a professional interpreter.

Who hires the interpreter?

In formal international negotiations,

government-to-government discussions, or important bilateral meetings, each side hires interpreters. Alternatively, the parties may agree to hire a pool of interpreters by mutual consent.

If you are a business person, for example, and about to call on a client, prospective or present, courtesy demands that you take an interpreter of your own. It is impolite, and culturally insensitive, to assume that the Japanese party you are calling on will speak your language. They may; in fact they may speak it quite well. But check first: always ask if you should bring an interpreter with you.

If the host says you don't need to because he or she speaks English, fine. On the other hand, if the matter is serious or sensitive, you probably should bring your own interpreter regardless. At times you may have to gently, but firmly, insist on doing so. But don't be dissuaded, especially if the occasion involves some type of confrontation or conflict of interest. You should definitely bring an interpreter if it is a sales visit.

Briefing your interpreter

An interpreter does not merely translate words. He or she (very often she) conveys your message. That is why providing background information and briefing your interpreter about the purpose of the meeting is essential. Very often we are told that the business (or technical) discussion is such a confidential matter that no prior information can be given to the interpreter. This is absolutely countereffective. It's money down the drain.

Provide the interpreter with a background picture of why the service is needed. This includes, for example, your corporate brochure, catalog, or other illustrated materials.

Supply some information about the parties to be called on. Serious professional interpreters want as much information as appropriate beforehand, to

ready themselves for the assignment.

And professional interpreters, carefully chosen, are to be trusted on matters of confidentiality. The practitioners of our profession are much like doctors, nurses, lawyers, and the like. With each assignment we improve our capability; but we do not profit from proprietary information gained in the course of our work. Losing credibility is suicidal to an interpreter.

Terminology and text

You will find most professional interpreters are sufficiently familiar with business concepts and terminology, as well as current social and international matters, to be able to communicate the message intelligently between the parties involved. However, there are technical terms or trade jargon particular to every line of business, or technical or academic interest.

If there is a handy glossary with definitions or explanations, this should be given to the interpreter well in advance. If the event involves presentations, or the reading of papers, it is imperative that you give your interpreter a copy of the text as far enough ahead of time as possible, even though you may revise it as time goes on. You should then forward each revised edition.

Not providing your interpreter with even a preliminary or tentative draft can be very dangerous. The more carefully and thoroughly you have researched or pondered over the writing of your speech or presentation, the more time your interpreter will need to peruse it and check any difficult terms or delicate expressions. It is the only way to do your work justice.

You may work to death to polish and perfect your presentation, but if you keep the meticulously prepared document in your pocket or briefcase until the moment of delivery, you will only frustrate, even exasperate, your interpreter, who should be looked upon as your trusted assistant, indeed your com-



The author in front of Microsoft's head office in Seattle, WA, when he co-chaired the 78th meeting of the Japan-Western Americas Association.

rade in arms, as you both have the same mission.

It is wrong, on the other hand, for the interpreter to insist that you write out your speech for the interpreter's benefit. If you are speaking extemporaneously, you might wish to brief the interpreter regarding the general thrust of your remarks. But don't feel you must write it down when this is something you don't normally do.

Prepared vs. spontaneous speech

Many experienced public speakers do not read prepared texts, especially in non-technical discussions. That is fine. Extemporaneous speeches by skilled public speakers are often far more interesting to the audience, especially when they are served by top-notch professional interpreters. For us, it is a delightful experience to handle totally

unrehearsed, unprepared remarks and render them into words that are equally (one hopes) powerful, elegant, or otherwise effective.

Handled by less experienced, or worse still, less dedicated or serious interpreters, your masterpiece may go flat. Modesty prevents me from declaring that no international conference can be better than the quality of the interpreters working for it. If I weren't modest, I would have said it at the outset of this essay.

Putting the blame on interpreters, sometimes unjustly

The best kind of interpreting performance is one that unfolds so smoothly and naturally that nobody really notices that language is being translated. People, speaking different

tongues, look into each other's eye and go on talking as if all were speaking one language. Nothing delights good professionals more than seeing this happen.

Unfortunately, we are sometimes unjustly blamed for miscommunication beyond our control. For example, when one or both sides are ideologically or conceptually hardheaded, or even uninterested in really communicating, interpreters sometimes get the blame, which is totally unwarranted.

I recall one bilateral Japanese-American conference where some of the Japanese participants were speaking in English, not badly but I wished they had relied on us. A frustrated American delegate complained about poor communication and blamed it on the interpreters, when in fact they were listening to each other's English, not our interpreted version! One is reminded of the ancient Roman messenger who was beheaded for bringing ill tidings of an army's

defeat. We are more fortunate today.

At the end of a successful international convention, the spokesman from the host's and/or the visitor's side will sometimes go on at some length complimenting the services, courtesy, efficiency, etc., of the people involved, including those behind the scenes, the "unsung heroes," as the cliché goes. Some people go on and on, naming the hotel management, staff, banquet people, and waiters, but then forget to mention the interpreters.

We are accustomed to it; we don't expect compliments. We repeat banquet people, staff, waiters, etc., in every detail, without inserting "interpreters."

Jokes, colloquialisms, humor

Go easy on these, but don't shy away from them. They can really enliven your meeting if employed properly and in good taste. The interested reader may wish to refer to the preceding parts of this "Reflections" series for ample, useful examples from the mouths of fine speakers.

How to find the best interpreters

Good professional references, word-of-mouth, Japanese diplomatic/consular establishment, or JETRO officials can all be helpful in finding interpreters. Or Simul International, Inc., with which I have been associated for over 31 years, with offices in Tokyo, Osaka, and Los Angeles (Simul America), will be happy to be of assistance. DM

[last in a six-part series]

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