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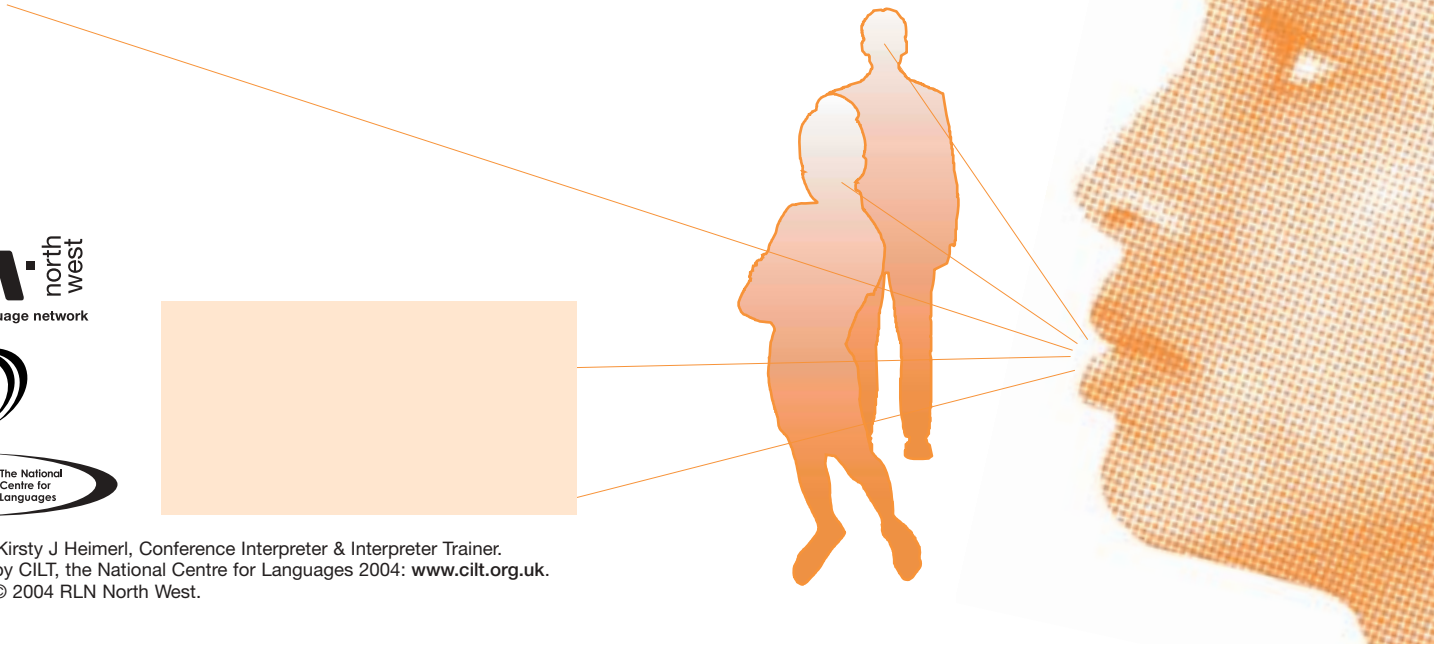
Conference Interpreting

A guide to commissioning quality interpreting services



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Conference Interpreting can make a multinational conference or business meeting run smoothly. If you are organising a multilingual event, this brochure explains what you need to know.

Interpreting takes place in different environments:

- in conference or multi-party meetings;
- in the public services;
- in one-to-one business meetings.

Conference Interpreting falls into two main categories:

- Simultaneous;
- Consecutive.

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Simultaneous Interpreting

This involves a team of professional interpreters. They sit in booths (two per language, per booth) in the meeting room. Speakers are interpreted simultaneously and the sound is relayed to delegates by means of headphones.

Whispering or 'chuchotage'

This is another version of simultaneous interpreting, in which the interpreter whispers simultaneously to one or two listeners. It is not possible for one interpreter to whisper to more than two listeners and careful thought must be given to seating arrangements.

'Tourguide'

This is used, in exceptional cases, in small meetings. It is a roving microphone used by the interpreter, whereby the interpretation is fed back to the delegates through headphones. But this can make the interpreter's life more difficult as there are often acoustic problems.

Advantage: No time loss, spontaneous reaction of all participants, lively discussion across language barriers.

Consecutive Interpreting

Here the interpreter listens to the speaker, takes notes and renders the speech in the target language once the speaker has finished.

Advantage: No interpreting equipment is required and delegates have more time to think and take notes.

Disadvantage: Requires double the amount of time. It is not suitable for an event with several foreign languages or when lively discussion is to be encouraged.

What are the interpreter's duties?

The interpreter has to relay the message received in one language into another language, remaining true to the original content. It is important to convey ideas and not words alone. Interpreters prepare for conferences in advance, and discretion and confidentiality are part of their professional code of conduct.

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How do you select your interpreters?

Interpreters are multilingual and their working languages are usually classified as follows:

Active languages

A-language: The interpreter's native language (or another language strictly equivalent to a native language), into which the interpreter will translate, from all his or her other languages in both modes of interpretation – simultaneous and consecutive.

B-language: A language other than the native language, over which the interpreter has perfect command and into which he or she works, from one or more of his or her languages. Some interpreters work into a B-language in only one of the two modes of interpretation.

Passive languages

C-language: A source language which the interpreter understands perfectly but does not use as a target language.[1]

1 Source language is the language from which the interpreter translates. Target language is the language into which the interpreter translates. For example, if interpreting a speech in English to a Polish audience, English is the source language and Polish the target language.

It is vital that you find the most qualified professional interpreters available on the market. As with all service providers, the better the certification and qualifications, the more confident you can be of receiving a high quality service.

The services of a Consultant Interpreter may help you assess the mode of interpretation best suited to your individual requirements, the number of interpreters you may need and even assist you in bringing together such a team. Additionally, a Consultant Interpreter can advise on the choice of technical equipment and/or provide the name of reputable technicians and generally help to share the workload of the organiser when it comes to language services for the meeting.

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Working conditions

- Independent interpreters are recruited as a team, with a minimum of two interpreters per language booth.
- Soundproof booths are used for simultaneous interpreting and should provide a clear view of the speakers.
- Interpreters should not be asked to work through breaks or to translate conference texts during that time. They need to unwind after periods of intense concentration.
- Giving conference materials to the interpreters well in advance (speeches, PowerPoint presentations, etc) will ensure a much higher standard of interpretation. A list of delegates' names, particularly those of the speakers, is very useful.
- The conference room should have good acoustics and background noise should be minimised.
- The interpreters' booths should be located so they can see speakers/panel and screens or projections without any difficulty.
- In the simultaneous mode, a reputable technician should be present in the meeting room at all times to be on hand for any technical difficulties that may arise, so that there are as few interruptions as possible.

Business terms

- Freelance interpreters receive frequent job offers during busy seasons. For this reason, clients should book interpreters as far ahead as possible.
- Freelancers usually work on the basis of individual contracts and are hired and remunerated on a daily basis. A regular day can consist of up to eight hours, including breaks.
- Travel expenses are paid in addition to the fee, and accommodation and meals for the interpreters are provided by the client, preferably at the venue itself.

Where to go next

BLIS Professionals A quality-assured on-line database of language service providers, maintained by CILT, the National Centre for Languages: **www.blis.org.uk/professionals**

Institute of Linguists The Institute of Linguists serves the interests of professional linguists throughout the world and acts as a respected language assessment and accredited awarding body: **www.iol.org.uk**

Institute of Translation and Interpreting An independent professional association of practising translators and interpreters in the United Kingdom: **www.iti.org.uk**

International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) The worldwide association for conference interpreters: **www.aiic.net**

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Advice for speakers at multilingual conferences

- Speak clearly and concisely at all times, and at a reasonable speed (even if you have just been told you have to finish in five minutes and you still have fifteen minutes of presentation left!). If at all possible, try to hold a short conversation with your interpreters before you deliver your presentation. This will give them a chance to 'tune their ear' into your speech patterns and accent. Accent rarely causes difficulty – it is poor diction that makes you hard to understand.
- Do not read from a text which you have not made available to the interpreters.
- Use a clip-on microphone where possible. If you have to use a stationary/fixed microphone, stay close to it. When pointing to a screen behind you, do not speak while turning away.
- When using abbreviations for the first time, explain them for everyone's benefit.
- The same is true for technical terminology. Here it would be useful to give a copy of your talk to the interpreters in advance (even if you only have rough notes).
- Be aware of cultural differences and implications these may have on what you say at multinational events. If you have any doubts about this, consult your interpreter beforehand.
- Beware of jokes which are a play on words and may be untranslatable.

I would like to congratulate the Regional Language Network North West (RLN NW) for the initiative and foresight it has shown in publishing this very useful and concise guide to Conference Interpreting.

Organising a conference or meeting of whatever size is a complex task. This is particularly the case when participants expect to be able to express themselves in languages other than English. To make multilingual events a success considerable amounts of forward planning as well as a working knowledge of the human and technical resources required are essential.

The team of qualified professional conference interpreters you engage for a specific meeting is there to help the host of the meeting in two main respects. To ensure that multilingual communication between participants is kept as free flowing and accurate as possible and that the business of the meeting is carried out expeditiously. As in most specialist walks of life, high quality conference interpretation depends not only on the qualification of the interpreter but also on appropriate physical and technical working conditions.

As a member of the profession, I most warmly welcome this excellent publication.

Lady Gore-Booth

President
Institute of Linguists