

WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS



Thank you for downloading our white paper on working with interpreters. It is primarily intended for readers who have not worked with interpreters yet. Of course, we are happy to discuss your projects in person or on the phone but we hope you will appreciate a written summary of a few points that will help you maximize the value of interpretation, and make your work with interpreters a pleasant experience for everyone involved.

While we are able to meet most multilingual communication needs, various options are available depending on your budget. This paper describes common types of meetings with interpretation, outlines high-end, medium-range and bare-bones solutions for them, and discusses their costs and benefits.

We appreciate your feedback. Please let us know if you feel we have not covered some points clearly enough. We will take your comments into account when drafting future versions of this white paper.

We hope you will enjoy reading this paper and, most importantly, working with your interpreters!

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The basics

- To interpret well, we must first understand.

Let's turn the tables. Imagine you have been sent to take minutes at the annual meeting of the Association of Conference Interpreters. As it is a last-minute assignment, and you haven't had a chance to read any background documents, all you know is that interpreting means oral translation, and that there is a difference between simultaneous and consecutive interpretation.

You will probably be fine as long as the discussion revolves around procedural points, but I'm willing to bet that even if the proceedings are conducted in your mother tongue, you will have a hard time taking minutes when the debate turns to, say, whether the system of guaranteed departures effectively forces many colleagues to serve as *pivot unique* for the last hour of the session, or whether Greek should have really counted as the second relay for Finnish, given that so few booths had Greek in that particular meeting. Huh? Actually, that debate would make perfect sense to us interpreters, because we are familiar with the context.

If you were to do a good job taking minutes at our convention, you would need to be briefed about the meeting, and do some background reading about interpretation. If we are to do a good job interpreting at your convention, the same applies.

- Good briefing leads to good interpretation.

A good briefing helps us understand what kind of homework we need to do before interpreting for you. There are several questions we are likely to ask you when we begin discussing your event.

First, what field and subjects will be discussed at the meeting? "Medicine" is not specific enough; "new active substances for the treatment of opiate addiction" is. If you take the time to briefly explain basic terms and concepts, it'll be much appreciated. Otherwise, we can do our own research, provided we know what to look for.

Second, what is the format of the meeting? Let's stay with the example of medical meetings: is it a scientific congress, an industry presentation or a workshop for patients?

Third, is it a follow-up meeting? Do the parties know each other? Is conflict likely to occur? What were the conclusions of the previous meeting? (We need to know that because speakers often refer to past business indirectly without restating it.) Do you use jargon? Are certain terms frowned upon in your style guide? What are your expectations of this meeting?

- Names: forewarned is forearmed.

It is very helpful to get a list of speakers and other names that are likely to come up, particularly if those names are unusual. It is embarrassing when people don't respond to a question because they didn't recognize their own name, and did not realize the question was meant for them. It is notoriously easy to mispronounce names or hear them wrong.

Please specify the gender of a speaker if it is not clear from his or her name. In some languages, one can't even start a sentence without knowing the gender of the person the sentence describes.

- Why is it not fair to read out a text without first sharing it with the interpreters?

Interpreting a read-out statement without having a chance to peruse it first is like trying to compete with a Formula One pilot while driving a sports car without a navigator. There comes a point when you simply can't keep up even in the fastest Porsche. It's not a fair race.

If we have a chance to study your statement in advance, the part of your audience that listens to you through us will have a much better experience.

- Documents – a level playing field.

Imagine someone takes the floor to say: "Let me refer you to a table on page 50 of the document number 1950/2012. The volumes on lines 7 and 8 are 6,780,539,479.597 and 19,359,427,497.647, respectively, which represents an increase of 285.55145%". Processing long strings of figures is a tall order in and of itself; remembering and repeating them in another language is even more challenging. Having the document 1950/2012 at hand would make it a lot easier.

Let me give you another example: if you are about to discuss a contract that has already been officially translated into the other language, the interpreters should be given both language versions.

In a nutshell, interpreters should have the same set of documents as any other participant in your meeting.

- Confidentiality goes without saying.

Please do not feel uncomfortable sharing documents, even confidential documents, with interpreters. While confidentiality is part of our code of ethics, we are happy to sign confidentiality agreements. If confidential documents may not be sent electronically, we will be ready to come in early and read them before the meeting, provided we have access to the Internet to look up terminology.

- The longer the professional relationship, the shorter the briefing.

To illustrate: I have several clients for whom I have been interpreting at highly technical annual meetings for more than a decade. At this stage, these clients simply tell me the dates of the next conference, send me the program, abstracts, and written contributions as they arrive, and let me know when and where I'm expected. I do my homework, consult unfamiliar terminology, and am ready to interpret. It can be as simple as that. If you are hiring us for the first time, there could be a bit more back-and-forth.

- The myth: interpreters have two heads and no stomach.

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is common practice to provide still water to interpreters. Coffee and tea is appreciated. If we are not eating lunch with the rest of the participants, we need to be told in advance and given enough of a lunch break to be able to eat elsewhere.

- Feedback improves service.

As they say, if you are happy with us, tell others; if you are not happy, tell us. If there are any issues, please let us know as promptly as possible. Problems often begin with a misunderstanding, and most misunderstandings can be easily dispelled.

Simultaneous and consecutive interpretation – the basics

In meetings with simultaneous interpretation, the speaker and the interpreter(s) speak at the same time. The speaker speaks into a microphone. The interpreters sit in sound-proof booths, and listen to the speaker in their headphones. They interpret into microphones, and the audience listens to them in earphones. If a meeting is longer than thirty minutes, each booth is manned by two interpreters who take regular turns.

In meetings with consecutive interpretation, the speaker and the interpreter don't speak at the same time. The pattern in a conversational meeting is: question – question interpreted – answer – answer interpreted. When interpreting longer addresses or presentations consecutively, we let the speaker finish a thought and come to a natural pause before we step in to interpret what has been said. A bilingual meeting that lasts up to 90 minutes without a break can be served by a single interpreter. Otherwise, two interpreters need to be hired to take turns.

Of course, if you dig deep enough, you will be able to find interpreters on the Prague market who are willing to work alone in the booth all day, or interpret a long, intense contractual negotiation, business lunch included, without taking turns with another interpreter. Good interpretation is an exhausting mental activity; after almost twenty years on the market, I have yet to meet an interpreter who is able to interpret all day without a break while maintaining consistent quality. Established interpreters don't need to put their reputation on the line by accepting a job they know they can't do well.

- Is consecutive interpretation cheaper? Well, it depends...

On the one hand, consecutive interpretation is cheaper, because it does not require any equipment - such as booths, consoles, headphones, earphones - or a technician to install and operate the equipment.

Without that equipment, however, the speaker and the interpreter cannot talk at the same time, which means that consecutive interpretation requires twice as much time as simultaneous interpretation to communicate the same amount of information. In my experience, this important detail often slips the mind of organizers and speakers. They plan a twenty-minute presentation, which either ends up taking forty minutes or the speaker is forced to skip half the material.

Also, consecutive interpretation may seem less comfortable both for the speaker and for the audience. Speakers have to stop for interpretation; if they are not used to the dynamic, they may find it challenging to stay on track. The audience spends half the time listening to a language they do not understand. So while the bill for consecutive interpretation will be smaller, there are a few downsides.

Simultaneous interpretation – in the booth or whispered?

While equipment rental is far from free, the biggest advantage booth interpretation offers is that the interpreters' voices don't disturb people who want to listen to the original, because interpreters work in sound-proof booths. Simultaneous interpretation in the booth is by far the most comfortable solution for the speaker, the audience and the interpreters alike. If a meeting is interpreted into several languages, booths are the only option.

If you are organizing a small meeting with no more than twenty people listening to interpretation, and are on a budget, you may consider renting wireless equipment. The equipment is similar to that used by tour guides. The interpreters sit in the meeting room but not in a sound-proof booth. Even if the interpreters speak softly, their voices can still disturb those members of the audience who sit nearby. Also, unless the meeting room has excellent natural acoustics, it needs to be equipped with a sound system and microphones, otherwise the interpreters will not hear well enough to do their job. That said, wireless equipment is much cheaper to rent than a full booth, and does not require any complicated assembly or the presence of a technician.

Whispered simultaneous interpretation is suitable for brief and very small meetings (one-on-one or two-on-two) in which time is of essence or the speakers should not be interrupted. Each party is served by one interpreter. Whispered interpretation is often used for presidential bilaterals. This is how it works: when President #1 speaks, interpreter #2 whispers to President #2; when President #2 speaks, interpreter #1 whispers to President #1. To avoid stiff necks (both the presidents' and the interpreters'), the interpreters must be seated next to their clients not behind them.

On the following pages, you will find a brief overview of interpretation in various settings:

- business meetings, courtesy calls, audiences
- workshops
- bilingual meetings in which up to 18 people speak one language, and up to 2 people another language
- an international guest speaker attending a symposium held in Czech
- multilingual conferences
- podium addresses

Business meetings, courtesy calls, audiences

Meeting size, length, and time pressure are the main variables to consider when deciding between consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. By time pressure we mean how important is it not to prolong the meeting by interpretation.

Meeting length	Meeting size	Time pressure	Type of interpretation
short	small	low	One consecutive interpreter
short	small	high	Two interpreters, each whispering to one delegation
long	small	low	Two consecutive interpreters taking turns
long	small	high	Two simultaneous interpreters with a booth or wireless equipment
short	large	low	One consecutive interpreter
short	large	high	Two simultaneous interpreters with a booth or wireless equipment
long	large	low	Two consecutive interpreters taking turns
long	large	high	Two simultaneous interpreters with a booth or wireless equipment

“Short meeting” means no more than 90 minutes without a break or up to four hours with regular breaks.

“Long meeting” means more than 90 minutes without a break

“Small meeting” - two delegations, each represented but two people at most

“Large meeting” - anything above two-on-two.

Workshops

The main variable to consider is how much time the participants will spend listening to lectures, working in groups or working alone.

If the workshop has fewer than 20 participants, and is structured into sessions that open with a block of lectures followed by individual or group work, and close with presentation of results, then I recommend the following solution: lectures are interpreted simultaneously via wireless equipment; the trainer's interaction with the groups is interpreted consecutively; the presentation of results at the end of the exercises is whispered to the trainer. Two interpreters need to be hired for the job.

If sessions open with a short briefing rather than lectures, and most of the workshop is devoted to group or individual work, with the trainer supervising and providing feedback, then I recommend the following solution: the trainer can be interpreted consecutively, and the interpreter can whisper the interpretation of the participants' input to the trainer. If the workshop lasts for more than half a day, two interpreters need to be hired.

Bilingual meetings in which up to 18 people speak one language, and up to 2 people another language

We usually encounter this setup in management or board meetings of international corporations or other groups, where all but one or two participants speak Czech.

The following factors need to be taken into account when choosing a type of interpretation:

- Will each participant have a microphone?
- If there are no microphones in the room, can one hear and understand the person seated at the far end of the table?
- If each participant has a microphone, is it likely that the Czech speakers will at some point talk to each other off microphone?
- Is it okay for interpreters to sit next to the people they work for?
- Will it disturb the meeting if interpreters speak in a low voice to their audience, or if they take turns?
- Do all participants understand the language of their international co-workers? In other words, is the meeting held in Czech so that ten Czechs would not have to speak to each other in a foreign language just because one or two members of the group do not speak Czech?
- How often do the non-Czech participants speak? Do they need to be interpreted into Czech?

SCENARIO #1

The meeting room comes with sound equipment and microphones. The participants are used to speaking into the microphone during the meeting. The non-Czech participant takes the floor roughly as often as the rest of the group, and must be interpreted into Czech.

The best solution: two interpreters in a booth

A cheaper but less comfortable solution: two interpreters and wireless equipment

SCENARIO #2

The meeting room has naturally good acoustics; even people who sit at the farthest ends of the table have no difficulties hearing and understanding each other. The non-Czech participant is an observer, who intervenes only rarely. The other participants do not mind that the voice of interpreters is slightly audible in the room, and that interpreters occasionally take turns.

In this case, whispered simultaneous interpretation without any equipment is a feasible option. The non-Czech speaker can be interpreted into Czech consecutively. Two interpreters are needed for the job.

These two scenarios are the black and white with a lot of gray in between. Always consider the advantages and drawbacks of booth interpretation, wireless equipment and whispered simultaneous interpretation.

Whispered simultaneous interpretation works best if there is only one listener. If two people listen to whispered interpretation, the interpreter needs to be seated between them. Whispered simultaneous interpretation is not suitable for more than two listeners. If the interpreter speaks loudly enough to be heard by a larger group, he will not hear the original well enough to do his job.

An international guest speaker attending a symposium held in Czech

We have encountered this format mainly when working for pharmaceutical companies who organize symposiums to present new active substances to medical doctors. Sometimes, they invite a guest speaker from abroad to make one of the presentations.

The best and most comfortable solution is a booth with two simultaneous interpreters.

That said, sometimes the guest speaker stays in the room only to deliver his presentation and answer questions. In these cases, our clients often ask for a single interpreter to interpret the presentation and the Q&A consecutively, which is obviously a much cheaper solution.

Of course, it can be done, but bear in mind that consecutive interpretation will double the time you need for the presentation and the Q&A. Guest speakers are often not aware of that, come with material for full twenty minutes, and realize on the spot that they, in fact, only have ten minutes. Furthermore, consecutive interpretation of highly technical lectures full of figures is a challenge. The interpreter *must* be given the slides a few days in advance. If the speaker is going to read the lecture, the interpreter *must* be given the full text. Before the symposium starts, it is a good idea to set aside a few minutes for the speaker and one of the organizers to meet with the interpreters in case there are any questions.

On a couple of occasions, the guest speaker changed his mind on the spot, and asked for whispered interpretation of the whole symposium. As our client hired only one interpreter, we were not able to help. While whispered interpretation would certainly be possible, it is a two-person job.

Multilingual conferences

A team of simultaneous interpreters working in booths is the only feasible option for multilingual conferences. We will be happy to recommend a trusted provider of conference equipment.

Again, let us cover a few common scenarios.

Two working languages (e.g., Czech and English)

The team is composed of two simultaneous interpreters. Both work between Czech and English, and take turns regularly, usually at the end of each lecture.

More than two working languages (e.g., Czech, French, English, German and Spanish)

Basically, there are three ways of composing a team of interpreters; the choice depends on how critical it is that there be direct interpretation from each language into every other language. Before we go any further, I need to explain the notion of relay. Relay means interpreting from one language into another language via a third language.

Let me illustrate it on an example: a Spanish speech will be interpreted into English through Czech. In other words, when Spanish is spoken in the meeting, the interpreter working into English will tune into the interpretation from Spanish into Czech, and work from it into English.

Generally, the more working languages, the more difficult and costly it will be to cover all language pairs without relay. The institutions of the European Union often hold meetings with interpretation into and out of 22 languages, where it is practically impossible to set up a team of interpreters without any relay. In fact, although almost half of the language pairs are covered through relay, the impact on the proceedings is minimal. Relay does not automatically mean loss of quality. It does, however, produce a certain time lag that needs to be taken into account in fast-paced debates: after one speaker has turned off his microphone, the chairman needs to wait a couple of seconds before passing the floor to the next speaker to make sure the first speaker has been fully interpreted into those languages that are using a relay.

1) If you are organizing a conference in Prague with a large number of working languages and/or with less frequent languages, the simplest and cheapest solution is to hire a team of interpreters who will work *mostly* through Czech relay. For the sake of simplicity, let's say that your conference is held in Czech, French, English and Spanish. The English booth will interpret from Czech into English and from English into Czech; when English is spoken in the meeting, the other booths will interpret into their languages through Czech. In this particular case, the team will be composed of eight local interpreters.

2) Another option is to set up a team that will be able to cover as many language pairs as possible directly, and use relay for the rest. Again, let me illustrate how it could work:

EN→CS CS, DE, FR→EN ES→CS→EN

The English booth works directly from English into Czech, and from Czech, German and French directly into English. When Spanish is spoken, it will work through a Czech relay.

DE→CS CS, EN→DE FR, ES→CS→DE

The German booth works directly from German into Czech, and from Czech, and English into German. When French and Spanish are spoken, it will work through a Czech relay.

FR→CS CS, EN, ES→FR DE→CS→FR

The French booth works directly from French into Czech, and from Czech, English, and Spanish into French. When German is spoken, it will work through a Czech relay.

ES→CS CS, EN, FR→ES DE→CS→ES

The Spanish booth works directly from Spanish into Czech, and from Czech, English and French into Spanish. When German is spoken, it will work through a Czech relay.

Even in this case, the team is composed of 8 local interpreters who may, however, charge a small premium for having to work between more than two languages.

3) The third and most costly solution is to set up a team that needs no relay. That will, however, require bringing interpreters from abroad. Let's stick with English, Czech, German, French and Spanish as working languages. Without relay, the team will be composed of five booths, three interpreters per booth. Twelve of them will have to be flown in from abroad.

Conference held in one language and interpreted into several languages

Occasionally, the entire conference is held in English and interpreted directly into a number of languages. Let's stick with English into Czech, German, French and Spanish.

Frankly, this works only if all speakers have an excellent command of English, and there is no Q&A.

Otherwise, French, German, Spanish and Czech delegates will be forced to speak English, which they often aren't sufficiently fluent in, only to be interpreted back into their mother tongue, which is a bit absurd. On top of that, the interpreters spend most of the day working from heavily-accented English, which makes their job even harder than it already is.

If you insist, and want to hire a local team, expect to pay a premium. Your other choice is to bring interpreters from abroad, which is expensive: higher fees, per diem, travel and accommodation costs.

Conference held in two languages other than Czech

Some language combinations, notably English–Russian, English–French, English–German, English–Italian, English–Arabic, French–Arabic, can be covered by Prague-based interpreters. They will charge a 50 % premium for working between two languages other than Czech. In other cases, interpreters will need to be flown from abroad. Alternatively, add Czech to the language regime, and proceed as described above; the costs are comparable.

Podium addresses

At the opening of festivals, exhibitions and similar events, large audiences are addressed by one or several speakers from the podium. Sometimes, some of the speakers are from abroad, and need to be interpreted.

Let's look at an example of an event with four speeches in Czech and one in English.

The first question is: will the Czech speeches be interpreted into English only for the fifth speaker on the podium? If so, then I would suggest consecutive interpretation from English into Czech, and whispered interpretation into English for the fifth speaker.

If the audience is mixed, and requires interpretation into Czech as well as English, booth interpretation is a better option. At least consider whether the audience will enjoy spending twice as much time listening to speeches and their consecutive interpretation.

If speeches are interpreted consecutively from the podium, then:

- The interpreter must have an opportunity to meet with the M.C. in advance.
- The interpreter must have his own microphone on a stand.
- The interpreter must be given any text that will be read out, in advance.
- The interpreter must be able to test the sound during the official sound check, because in large halls, there is often a strong echo close to the microphones on the podium. As a result, the interpreter can't hear or understand the speaker who stands only a few feet away, even if the audience hears both perfectly well. If the problem is identified well before the event is due to open, there is a way of working around it.

A well-established interpreter is likely to turn down a stage job unless all of these conditions have been met. We don't mean to be difficult but there is nothing more frustrating than being the only person in the room who doesn't hear the speaker due to a strong echo. None of us is willing to put his or her professional reputation on the line by not being able to do a good job because of circumstances that are beyond our control, while the audience doesn't understand what the problem is.