Off mic with Phil Smith: Relay race

At times English booth interpreters must provide relay for the rest of the team. Give us a minute while we ramp up - we’re busy people. The mysteries of relay interpreting are herein revealed.

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There are times when your language combination is considered run-of-the-mill, and there are times, or perhaps more accurately places, where your languages might be thrillingly exotic. I certainly see myself as occupying the exotic end of the market and therefore people occasionally have the questionable pleasure of taking me on relay. I’m sure the same has happened to you because there are those amongst us whose torpor has kept them from learning German or Dutch or Turkish. We all have to do our best for these poor, benighted souls.

A few years ago someone suggested we award a prize for good relay. I think they wanted to call it the Golden Microphone, or it might have been the Cloth Ears. The idea is worth examining so I’ll suggest that AIIC set up a couple of working parties and send out a 97-page questionnaire.

Each of you will have developed your own technique for keeping the wheels of international communication turning, but for those wishing to up their game I am setting out my system for providing relay:

- Switch your microphone on late because colleagues love the suspense. In some booths they take bets, adding to the general merriment of the meeting.
- Drink a lot, and if possible pour some fizzy mineral water. Ice cubes are an asset but hard to come by outside the North American region, where every booth has an ice machine.
- Try eating whilst working. Crisps are a great favourite.
- Turn your head from the microphone and scrabble around in your briefcase or handbag. Keep talking whilst you do it, as colleagues are tickled pink by the Doppler effect it creates.
- Mumble.
- Colleagues love to improve their word power, so drop in some scrumptious synonyms. Obscure metaphors and similes are popular, as are regional dialects. Colleagues are generally fascinated in discovering ancient words to describe everyday things like a dinner plate or left-handedness
- Invite people in other booths to visit so they can make all the social arrangements with your colleague while you work. With any luck everyone on relay will be able to fall in with your plans.
- Encourage the tea lady to bring her trolley into your booth so your colleague can embark on a long negotiation about light confectionary in a stage whisper.
- Switch off the microphone to give your colleagues a blast of the original. It’s a cleansing experience.
- Make sure your colleague is listening to music on her I-Pod.
● Rustle the newspaper.
● Resist the temptation to call “90” *four-score-and-ten*, despite the French booth doing it to you all the time. One can overdo things.
● If the floor is given to another speaker or back to the chairman, keep this information to yourself. The consummate expert is the person who can get interpreters to work from and into their own language via relay, say the Spanish booth to interpret Spanish back into Spanish. Prizes are given for how long you can keep this going.

There are certain times in an interpreting life when the English booth holds itself in steely readiness while only English speakers take the floor because all the Francophones have gone shopping. In an effort to use our time profitably we pursue useful and edifying pastimes, so you may well hear the sound of woodworking, basket weaving and guitars. Some colleagues – including women – have a full facial secure in the knowledge the Russians have gone to a football match[1]. So if due to unforeseen circumstances – say early closing – we have to provide you with relay, give us a minute while we ramp up to giving you our undivided attention. After all, we’re busy people.

Next time we meet on an AIIC-sponsored team building exercise – there’s been talk about cheese rolling in the Netherlands – please give me your input. I’d be the first to admit that there may be room for improvement in my system.


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