Interpretation at videoconferences – what’s the big deal?

It is said that interpreters do not like to interpret videoconferences, and you may wonder why. Well, the main reason is, or was, that the sound and images transmitted through a videolink into the conference room were often poor and faulty, e.g. the sound fades or drops away completely for a few seconds, or the image is not synchronised with the sound. All this makes it even harder for interpreters to do an already difficult job.

Jean-Pierre ALLAIN.
Published: September 10, 2007 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Interpretation means transposing a speaker's message from one language into an equivalent message in another language, simultaneously. To do this difficult task, interpreters need to:

- hear the speakers and observe all non-verbal signs that are part of communication (speaker's gestures, facial expressions, reactions of listeners, signs from the chairperson, etc.)
- analyse the explicit and implicit contents of the message to be interpreted
- transpose the message into another language while fully respecting its formal and cultural criteria
- make sure, by direct observation of the meeting room, that the message has been received

Interpreters usually work in built-in or mobile booths placed in the room where the conference is held. They can thus not only hear the speaker's message clearly but also observe all the non-verbal signs that are part of the message. In a videoconference some of this is lost.

However, information and sound-image transmission technologies are evolving and improving constantly, leading to more frequent use of interpretation at multilingual videoconferences. The quality nowadays is good enough, in most cases, to make simultaneous interpretation feasible.

Terminology

There is often confusion regarding the terminology used when talking about videoconferences. In addition, as technologies evolve, manufacturers and suppliers bring out new equipment with new names and, on top of that, users sometimes have their own names for types of conferences or equipment they use. A few definitions are therefore useful:

'Teleconferencing' or 'remote interpreting' nowadays refers to meetings with interpretation at which interpreters are located in a place other than the meeting room. This means they do not have a direct view of the speakers, the rostrum or of what's going on in the room.

'Videoconference' with interpretation is one specific kind of "remote interpreting". The term is most widely used for events (e.g. business meetings, associations' meetings, press conferences and product
launches) at which one or more speakers (usually VIPs unable to come) address a meeting at which the interpreters are all in the same room as participants. The off-site speakers are projected on a screen in the meeting room (and sometimes also on monitors in or in front of the interpreters' booths) and their speech is transmitted directly to the headsets of participants and interpreters. The quality of sound and image is now so much improved that interpreters can do as good a job as if the speakers were in the room. But the technical setup needs to be such that there are no problems of sound-image synchronisation.

**Image requirements**

Interpreters must be able to see the same images as the other participants. Additional dedicated images of the off-site speaker made available to the interpreters on monitors in or in front of their booths facilitate their task.

Interpreters need to see a close-up of speakers. Audience panning and shots of intervening participants are always necessary. In general, interpreters must be able to clearly see:

- the speaker
- the chairperson and others at the rostrum
- the panel participants, if it is a roundtable debate
- the listeners and, particularly, any possible movement of people in the room
- anything that is projected on a screen for the audience

**Screen location**

In addition to the screen in the meeting room, it is helpful for interpreters to have clear-resolution colour monitors placed outside and in front of the booths, unless the latter are large enough to accommodate one or two screens on the interpreters' desk at a comfortable distance from the interpreters. Monitors should not obstruct the interpreter's view of the conference room. They are not a replacement of the direct view of speakers and the room that interpreters need. They can only be considered as aids to provide a better view.

**Audio requirements**

The ISO 2603 standard prescribes a clear reproduction of sound frequencies between 125 Hz and 12,500 Hz over the whole speaker-interpreter-listeners circuit, in order to ensure adequate hearing without loss of message. The synchronisation of sound and image is especially important with satellite links.

**Technicians**

All the technicians working for the meeting or event (sound engineers, cameramen, SI technicians, satellite link-up technicians) should be aware of the planned programme and the running of the conference; they should know what is expected of them to accommodate simultaneous interpretation.

There should be at least one technician whose only task is to control interpretation parameters, both at the transmission point and the receiving point (the meeting room where interpreters are working), to ensure that microphones are correctly used by speakers and the sound quality at the time of transmission is the best possible.
Cameramen must be made aware of the needs of interpreters, e.g. a good-looking angle on a speaker may not necessarily show the interpreters all his facial expressions. Focussing on a backdrop or a banner outside a building while the speaker is being interpreted is of no help to the interpreters.

**Documents**

When off-site speakers who are connected by a video-link to the conference room read out a text (as often is the case), it is extremely important to ensure that the interpreters have received the text in advance.

**Headsets**

In a videoconference with interpretation, it is important to remember that off-site speakers should also have headsets, so that they can listen to questions or comments from the floor that are made in a language which they do not speak and which is being provided by the interpreters. A seemingly cheaper alternative - wiring up the off-site room PA system to receive all input in the speakers' own language, whether from the floor or via the interpreters - is liable to cause feedback and even preclude simultaneous interpretation.

**Workload**

If interpretation of off-site interventions, including questions and answers, during a conference at which video transmissions are being interpreted, exceeds two hours per day, it is recommended that two separate teams of interpreters be hired to cover a day's work. The two teams will relay each other at intervals of 1.5 to 2 hours. This compensates for the extra stress and fatigue induced by interpretation of video transmissions.

*Jean-Pierre Allain* is Chairman of the AIIC Technical and Health Committee

---

**Recommended citation format:**