Say it in interpreting

Perhaps something like this has happened to you. Say it's Tuesday and you are comfortably ensconced in your booth. You have absorbed all the vocabulary you need and the meeting is so routine that most of your mental effort is directed towards using words which are anagrams of the Chairman's name.

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At this point the Chairman himself (perhaps having noticed what you are doing) says, "Well, it's now five minutes past twelve, we have twenty-five minutes left. I intend to move on to the accounts. I know that we were supposed to deal with them on Thursday but if we can get the Treasurer to speak extra fast we might be able to get through them by lunch, which would give more time on Thursday." And, without any further introduction, the treasurer is off like a busy firework exploding words and figures in all directions.

You happen to be alone in the booth, Thursday's documents are out of easy reach and, in trying to grab them, you only manage to knock half a dozen other things onto the floor. So all you can do is put your ears back, your head down and try to follow. After a little while you hear someone knocking on the glass partition from the booth next door. You look up and find a colleague pointing to the floor and making an eager expression. Perhaps the report is down there. You look but you only see all the other things you have managed to knock over. You look back quizzically. They repeat their gesture with more emphasis. Is the floor giving in? Are your shoes on fire? Is there an interesting exotic species of beetle? An invasive band of free-range chickens? No time to continue this quest. Perhaps you are in imminent danger of falling through the floor but you can't stop to think about that because this little incident has held you up so that you are now thirty-two digits behind the speaker who has also broken out in a rash of glottal stops. When he says ‘illion, does he mean million, billion or brazillion? On you go clinging desperately to his rear bumper as you are dragged down a roughly cobbled financial street at great speed, but as usual you survive and even manage to get the message across (give or take a million). The session ends. You sit there for a while exhausted, listening to the golden and rapturous flow of silence gushing from your earphones. And then your colleague comes in. "I was trying to ask whether I could borrow your newspaper," and points to it again among the debris on the floor.

There are a number of lessons one could draw from this story. One: on the first day of a meeting clip the accounts to a lanyard and never let go of them. Two: Fold your newspaper sixteen times until you have a very dense tiny cube and never show it to anybody. Three: we interpreters need a sign language.

Let's face it. We pride ourselves on being the communication experts but we can't even get through to each other, at least when we have to signal something between booths. (I personally think we are not very good at communicating with others verbally either, because we are so used to having our
own channel that we stay on it even after work, but that is another matter). When I think back I believe that the only thing I have ever been able to communicate is "your microphone is off". Off, mind you, because I don't recollect ever having succeeded in signalling to anybody that their microphone was on. Perhaps I may have been able to express a need for water, but only if I had an empty bottle of water handy. (And faced by a more perceptive colleague than I am. Usually when someone waves an empty bottle at me, I wave back with my own.) Wouldn't it be good if we had some standard signals we could exchange when we needed to say, for example, Can you get a technician? Can you find my boothmate? The Twitterish booth is on the Garglic channel. Was that millions or billions? What's the score?

So I have a plan. In four stages. We should be realistic and start with just a few signals.

Phase 1 - First of all we ask people to write in and say what they think would be the most useful signs. After we have received enough answers (I have been given to understand that about three would be par for the course), we process them and make a list of the most important signs to have.

Phase 2 - with the help of gesturally eloquent people and someone who can draw perhaps, we develop the actual signs. We can make our own or borrow from a number of existing systems (my personal preference is for naval semaphore, but I doubt whether I would be able to convince many people to travel around with two flags).

Phase 3- we publicise the results and make cards and distribute them. If we combined this with a scratch card lottery we might actually convince people to use them (at least once). We could also have surprise drills every now and then.

Phase 4- at this point, after the basic signals have been absorbed and are in common use, I believe that we will encounter a lot of opposition from the more conservative members of the profession. Despite this a core group should be allowed to press ahead and develop the code further so that eventually those who wish to will be able to sign to each other about Hegel, tribology or nouveau plumbing while they interpret the treasurer.

One point: what are we going to call it? NASAP- not another silly acronym, please. Booth-to-booth, perhaps, which we could shorten to Boo-2-Boo, which is very probably a rude word in some language I don't know (surely a positive point). Or else, how about calling it something like Nuendo. Because then we could say things like "Did you say it in Nuendo?" which would further mystify and alarm the unfortunate delegates who have the misadventure to sit down for lunch next to the interpreters. Other variations on this theme would be Telligent, Effable, Tangibly, Sipid, Terlocutory or Terrupto! (Because of the strange habit they seem to have in Birmingham of referring to us as interruptors).

So write in with your phase 1 ideas. And if nobody answers, I won't mind. I have a fallback plan for a sign language to be used in noisy canteens, cafeterias and other eateries. I already have a name for it: Resteranto ©.

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