Interpreting depositions: a fact sheet

Here are a few things to keep in mind if you are ever contacted to interpret at a deposition.

1. Prepare very thoroughly: learn not only the facts of the case and points of law, but also the names of the law firms, the companies and/or individuals, exhibit numbers, and amounts involved. Figure out in advance which symbol you'll use for each name.

   *Lawyers tend to speak very fast during depositions, perhaps to buy time or to obfuscate, and those names and numbers need to be ready to roll off your tongue.*

2. Rehearse the situation using YouTube and other online sources.

   *There is plenty of material about preparing for depositions. Although it is mostly meant for lawyers, it will help you too. There are even lots of videos of actual depositions.*

3. Hone your consecutive skills. Remember to rely on your memory above all.

   *This is the toughest, most demanding consecutive interpreting assignment I can think of. You'll be tempted to regress to early training days, when notes were more of a crutch than a signpost – don't.*

4. Be as literal as possible: reformulate only if there is no alternative.

   *This is in aid of your memory: try too hard to understand in great depth and you'll lose track.*

5. Only interpret. Never try to answer a question made to you by the witness or talk aside with them during the hearing itself or breaks.

   *If this happens, immediately translate what the witness is saying, e.g., "The witness is asking me whether I know a good place to buy leather around here" or "The witness is telling me his wife is also a translator." It is very important for both parties to trust you and be sure that you would never take sides, no matter which party actually retained your services.*

6. Ask speakers to repeat names as many times as necessary.

   *Never hesitate to do this; better to appear “dense” once than to call Obama “Osama” and remain forever on tape to be heard over and over again.*

7. Expect scapegoating. Don't take it too personally if someone claims you have mistranslated something.

   *Once, a witness with excellent English claimed he would be more comfortable testifying in his own language, but then proceeded to correct my every word – with less-than-perfect results. He also kept asking me to repeat, so I was forced to explain to the lawyers that the witness wanted me to repeat*
my translation, then restate what I had said to the best of my memory, and finally accept the criticism and the correction. It was hard to keep a poker face, but I soon realized it was merely a tactic to wear out the other side: I was just collateral damage.

8. Be prepared for abrupt changes in register; don't get caught off-guard. Highly educated language may be followed by colorful street slang.

Harvard-graduate lawyer: "Sir, I need to ascertain the genuineness of the exhibit I am about to present to you. For the record, this is Exhibit A453. Can you unequivocally attest to the fact that this letter was written by your Uncle Tom?"
Deponent: "Listen, man, you'll have to give me a full ear here. I'm no hobnocker [1]. I told ya’ already, I ain’t gonna pretend I recognise the letter if I wasn’t with Uncle when he wrote it.

[1] A hobnocker is someone who does something illegal and gross.

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Recommended citation format: