Letter from the Editor: freelance interpreting

You’re nearing the end of the morning session and you feel good, even optimistic. Lunch is welcome and you follow it with a coffee, not that you feel in need of a pick-me-up, but it certainly won’t hurt. Then back to the booth, where an hour later it hits you with a sucker-punch: your eyes sag, a fog envelops your mind. That old nemesis - jet lag - is back with a vengeance.

Luigi LUCCARELLI.
Published: December 10, 2010 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Jet lag, or desynchronosis, seems impervious to counter-attacks - what works once often proves ineffective the next time around. This illusiveness of the adversary wears us down. We just know that we could do better, just have to keep trying… and that feeling accompanies us right up to the day that we resynchronise – if it comes.

Standard advice

The usual mantra is to prepare and pack with plenty of time to avoid extra stress, drink lots of water, avoid alcohol and coffee, create a comfortable space on the plane (and even exercise), and adjust to the new time zone by sleeping at the appropriate time. It all sounds so simple… plan, execute, conquer.

With this in mind and a trip on the horizon, I googled “how to sleep in economy class” and bingo!... an article with that exact title from CNN Travel popped up. I clicked and was greeted by a former flight attendant, who in a pleasant voice told me to take a seat with an empty one next to it and cocoon. She said that taxi and take off would naturally make me drowsy, priming me for a good sleep. But she didn’t even try to tell me how to get comfortable in a narrow seat with no legroom.

I also found British Air’s jet-lag calculator: for personalized instructions, just type in the time you usually wake up, whether you usually sleep well, and the current time where you are and at your destination. I duly did so for a trip from Korea to central Europe, and was told that I should “Seek light between 2:30 am and 5:00 am, avoid light between 5:00 am and 7:30 am.” Light therapy is said to help one adjust - makes sense, circadian rhythms and all that. But I am having some trouble figuring out how to get light 2 hours into my night flight: the reading lamp I suppose (hope it doesn’t bother my neighbor); I’ll have to set an alarm to wake me at 5:00 for the changeover (hope he’s not aggressive).

The most sensible advice article I found was this one from Psychology Today, but while noting that “Traveling around the world can result in significant symptoms that persist for weeks,” it mainly addresses the short-term effects of jet lag. Surely there is more than that.

Beyond the anecdotal: research

Indeed, studies have shown that there are lasting serious effects of frequent meridian crossing. The World Bank once organised a symposium on Stress, the Business Traveler and Corporate Health to
examine the matter. Here are a few quotes from some of the presenters (all papers are available at the above hyperlink).

“The mean time of readaptation after a time zone shift of six hours is different for different biological functions… It takes two to three days to get the rhythms in heart rate, the sleep-wake cycle and the performance resynchronised, and up to five to eight days before the rhythms in the hormone cortisol and the body temperature are resynchronised. However… the range of readaptaion within individuals varies from 2-18 days after a 6 hours time zone shift!!” (Björn Lemmer, Time Zone Travel and Peak Performance)

“Here is an individual reporting that he is at a rating of one (wide awake and alert), but physiologically he is about to enter the twilight zone. Ask somebody who is already tired ‘how they are doing’, and their tendency will be to say ‘I am fine’. So, reflect on the data we saw this morning, where all the travelers said they are doing just fine, jet lag is not a big deal, and 100 percent of the spouses and the partners said they are all exhausted, they are miserable, they are irritable at home.” (Mark Rosekind, Jet Lag and the Business Traveler—Mood, Behavior and Work Functioning)

“The effects of sleep loss are additive; and build into a sleep debt that leads to increased sleepiness, decreased physical and mental performance and increased negative mood.” (David Flower, MD, Overcoming Jet Lag: Alternative Models)

Going on to other sources, recent studies point to potential long-term problems. “Chronic jet lag alters the brain in ways that cause memory and learning problems long after one's return to a regular 24-hour schedule, according to research by University of California, Berkeley, psychologists,” begins this press release from UC Berkeley News.

Or this from Deutsche Welle: “Studies have also shown that aircraft crew who suffer from chronic jet leg are affected in various ways: their brains tend to shrink, they produce more stress hormones and women’s menstrual cycles are disrupted.”

This sample would suggest that there is more information out there. It’s a matter of finding it, elaborating on it and getting people (e.g. clients and employers) to listen and act in consequence

Interpreters

Although not all interpreters travel all the time, many of us do make several or more trips per year, sometimes one right after another. And often we return home and start a local assignment the following morning. Business class and/or rest days, when we can get them, help but are only palliative. We should be aware that frequent travel is not without lingering costs. Long-term effects demand long-term planning and action.

In the meantime, let’s hope that we are never asked to fly in the new “stand-up” airplane seats now being introduced!

This Issue

Anne Martin and Juan Miguel Ortega Herráez open with an engaging account of the use of simultaneous interpreting in a very visible court case. “The high profile trials of the 2004 Madrid train bomb attacks mark a watershed in the history and development of court interpreting in Spain,” they tell us in Nuremberg in Madrid: The Role of Interpreting in the Madrid Train Bomb Trial.

We expect an author to write with intent, so shouldn’t we anticipate the same when he speaks? Marc Orlando certainly found that to be the case when he interpreted for Andrei Makine, as he tells us in Interpreting Eloquence: When words matter as much as ideas.

Next, entering a different arena – technical subject matter - Mary Fons i Fleming muses on what
going literal is all about in Literally Right.

Seven years ago this month, Peter Sand introduced our readers to a glossary programme he developed in collaboration with Eric Hartner. Time brings change and Peter has returned to acquaint us with The New Interplex: Glossaries made fast and easy.

More than one member of our team has been thinking of the allure of travel. Jet lag may be nigh impossible to overcome, but you can avoid other pratfalls by traveling light. Mary Fons i Fleming doesn’t claim it’s easy, just that it’s possible: Carry On.

For our usual bookend, close web tracking and our band of LIN irregulars have uncovered stories on EULITA, a Nuremberg interpreter speaking out, language workers demanding recognition, and literary translation: Language in the News.

Articles reflect the views of the author(s) and should not be taken to represent the official position of AIIC.

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