Languages at your meeting

Which languages do your listeners understand? Which languages do your speakers speak comprehensibly? Choosing the right languages for your meeting is crucial for its success.

Active languages are the languages into which interpretation is provided. All listeners will need to understand one of them in order to follow the proceedings.

Passive languages are the languages participants will be able to speak. There may be more passive languages than active languages.

Your choice of active and passive languages will determine your interpreting needs and budget. You will look for interpretation to cover active and passive languages according to your speakers' and listeners' language skills.

- Active and passive languages
- Relay language
- Languages used by international organisations
- Session-specific languages
- Booking interpreters

Active and passive languages

Here are some practical cases to illustrate the use of active and passive languages.

An international car launch by a Spanish carmaker for journalists from Germany, France and Italy... No questions allowed. Most of the journalists invited are used to covering news in their own language.

You will need passive English and active German, Italian and French. This means six interpreters (2 German-speaking, 2 Italian-speaking, 2 French-speaking), as they will alternate in 30-minute shifts.

They must all have a perfect understanding of English – including automotive terms – and a perfect command of the language they interpret into, usually their mother tongue.

An IT meeting where everyone understands English "computer-speak" but which includes Polish and Russian participants who do not feel comfortable speaking English.

You will need active English and passive Polish and Russian. You will need two English-language interpreters who can work from both Polish and Russian.
Your organisation's official languages are English, French, German and Spanish.

You will need active and passive English, French, German and Spanish. Participants will be able to listen and to speak any of these four languages.

The English-language interpreters will need to understand French, German and Spanish at a professional level; the French will need a full understanding of English, German and Spanish; and so on. You will need 8 interpreters – two for each language.

Relay language

A relay language is one of the conference languages which some interpreters will be listening to when they do not master the speaker's language. It is not always possible to find interpreters who speak all of the conference languages. Relay is best avoided, but is sometimes inevitable.

Italian and Chinese authorities are meeting to discuss cooperation. Italian-Chinese interpreters are not available.

In this case, your consultant interpreter will propose a team of two Chinese–English interpreters and two English–Italian interpreters. When Chinese is spoken, the Italian interpreters will listen to the English translation provided by the Chinese-English interpreters and then interpret that into Italian. English in this case is a relay language, used to facilitate interpretation between two other languages.

Languages used by international organisations

At most international conferences interpretation is offered in the official languages of the organisation. The UN uses 6 official languages at its meetings: English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese.

The EU uses 23 official languages at some of its meetings; at others it uses fewer, with several in passive form. International federations and associations often have two or more official languages.

Session-specific languages

Not all sessions at a conference need the same languages. In Example 3 above, of an organisation with English, French, Spanish and German as official languages, for instance, the Budget Committee may have only German and English speaking members. There is no need for its meetings to have French and Spanish interpretation.

Separate choices can be made for each session. Your consultant interpreter can help you gauge the financial impact of different options.

Last-minute changes in your language requirements can be expensive, especially in the case of large teams of interpreters.

Booking interpreters
It is advisable to book your interpreters early, several months before your event. The best interpreters are often in high demand. Unusual language combinations may be hard to find at the last moment. Ask your AIIC consultant interpreter for advice.

Recommended citation format: