I once heard someone say there’s no such thing as a free lunch. I wonder. When plying our vital trade around the world we often find ourselves asked to eat with the delegates. This may be simple generosity on the part of the organizer or may arise from the practical need to feed and water us quickly because the lunch break is short – under three hours, really quite shocking – and there is no time for a slap-up meal at an indigenous hostelry.

You have accepted the kind invitation, but now have to get your act together. The meeting rises and the irrepressible interpreters have already got the lie of the land so could quite easily make it to the groaning buffet tables in double quick time. But that would mean getting there before the delegates who have still to unplug their laptops and find the stairs. Clearly it would be slightly awkward if the interpreters – yet be they ever so deserving – were first to tuck into the larks tongues on a coulis of turnip and sip something round bodied and fruity[1].

So we huddle on the edge of the culinary delights and wait for the first delegates to turn up – we want to keep up appearances and do nothing to tarnish our reputation for language skills, quick wits and all round decorum. You are doubtlessly nodding in recognition – the description succinctly captures our professional profile.

But be careful. Wait too long and the delegates will finally arrive, laptops safely stowed and tummies rumbling. To keep them on their toes they are restricted to just three croissants for breakfast so will fall on the assembled victuals with all the restraint of untamed gannets, so you have to be quick. Slip in with the first wave, load up your plate with the abundance on offer and find a quiet table, if possible far from the unblinking eye of the organizer who might just need a quick consecutive on next year’s discounted cash flow in your new C language.

If you wait for too long because you are a decently brought up person with your mother’s words “family hold back” still ringing in your ears, you will arrive at the buffet to find a disconsolate lettuce leaf and a slice of festive toast. Exactly, it’s not enough to keep a sparrow alive, to say nothing of keeping a vital cog in the wheels of international relations cheerfully spinning until happy hour.

So get your timing right, keep a low profile. You owe it to the international community.

[1] Please note: round-bodied and fruity does not refer to any colleague, living or dead.