

An Exercise in the Organization of Interpreting Services at High-Level Diplomatic Conferences

By Georganne Weller

On May 28-29, 2004, the Instituto Cabañas in Guadalajara, Mexico, was the setting for the Third Summit of Heads of State of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the European Union. Leaders and representatives of 58 countries from both continents gathered to debate the core issues of multilateralism and social cohesion, with the aim of fostering greater political and commercial collaboration among the regions. Discussions were led by Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, of Ireland, for the European Union and President Vicente Fox, of Mexico, for Latin America and the Caribbean. The summit provided continuity to principles developed at the first summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1999, which were adopted at the second summit in Madrid in 2002.

This summit provided some prime examples of the obstacles organizers of language services at such events continually face as they attempt to adequately and efficiently cover the linguistic needs of meeting participants. It is hoped that a discussion of these obstacles and possible solutions will shed new light on how interpretation services for such events may be better organized. Readers will also gain an understanding of the crucial role played by the chief interpreter at these meetings.

General Facts on Diplomatic Interpreting

What is diplomatic interpreting and what sets it aside from other types of conference interpreting? Hana Kucerova, in her article "Diplomatic Interpreting in Czechoslovakia," mentions high-level political talks, visits of heads of state and cabinet members, etc., as examples of situations where diplomatic interpreting is needed. As to what makes conference interpreting unique, she adds: "First, the normal requirements of the professional interpreter become more stringent: general qualifications as to language, culture, voice, diction, tact, the awareness of confidentiality. The diplomatic interpreter must inspire confidence and trust, often accepting undeserved blame, and be equally at ease in front of large audiences, millions of television viewers, or in face-to-face meetings between heads of state. Although interpreters are usually briefed for their assignments, these briefings do not take the place of the interpreter's own efforts to keep well informed of current events" (Ref. 2).

For many years, most diplomatic interpreting was done in the consecutive mode, which allowed diplomats time to ponder over what had been said before having to speak. It also afforded interpreters for each party time for self-correction or to confer on terminology issues. Nowadays, however, in the interest of time, most diplomatic interpreting at conferences is done in the simultaneous mode.

It should be noted that escort interpreting, if performed for diplomats, can also be considered diplomatic interpreting, but this method will not be discussed here since it is performed on an individual basis and does not require conference organization. Consecutive interpreting with note-taking will also not be discussed. The U.S. Department of State does not allow contract escort interpreters to interpret for foreign diplomats at high-level interviews, and states in its *Escort Interpreter Manual* that: "It is a matter of policy that Language Services staff interpret at all meetings between visitors who do not speak English and the President of the United States or State Department

officers of Assistant Secretary rank and above. This policy also applied to meetings with the Vice President, members of the President's Cabinet, the Directors of USIA [United States Information Agency] and USAID [United States Agency for International Development], and certain other U.S. government officials" (Ref. 6).

From a personal viewpoint, the major difficulty associated with diplomatic interpreting lies in the enormous responsibility and pressure the interpreter feels to not making a mistake that could lead to a diplomatic incident. Interpreters have often been blamed, rightly or wrongly, precisely for this fault, and to think that this might happen to you is enough to make one tremble! Another consideration in a less public vein is the personal and professional responsibility an interpreter has to the organizers or agency that does the hiring. By selecting you, the agency has placed its trust in your abilities to do a good job, and has faith that you will not bring on any unpleasant incidents.

Despite these pressures, there are several advantages associated with working at diplomatic conferences. You are often provided with copies of the delegate's speech and associated documents from which to work. In addition, the speakers are normally well-educated, high-level public officials who are used to making addresses at international events. This means that you don't have to wend your way through local trade terms, strong regional accents, extremely fast-paced deliveries, uneducated speech, and other stumbling blocks that can inhibit clear and effective communication in the target language. Of course, there are always exceptions.

Having explained the general nature of diplomatic interpreting, we should move on to the essence of this article: how interpretation services may be organized and the crucial role of the chief interpreter at such events.

Organization of Interpreting Services

Even the novice conference organizer will undoubtedly think to ask: How many interpreters do I need to cover all language combinations in all rooms at all times? This simple question leads to other considerations, including: How many sessions will be scheduled on the program, and, of these, how many are parallel sessions? Will all languages be used at all the sessions? Which sessions are likely to be the most difficult? Is a second interpreting team needed in any of the rooms due to extremely long meetings? Which interpreters work best together?

When deciding upon language coverage, there is a long-standing formula, proposed by Van Hoof (Ref. 7), which few interpreters are acquainted with: $N = n \times (n - 1)$, where "n" represents the number of working languages. This formula only applies to full interpreting teams, meaning two interpreters in the same booth working into the same language (normally their A language, from one or more of their B and/or C languages). It does not apply to bidirectional booths, where the interpreters work into a combination of their A and B languages from their A, B, and C languages (for example, into English from Spanish and possibly a third language, and into Spanish from English and possibly a third language). For most high-level diplomatic interpreting, full booths with interpreters working into their A language is the preferred mode. For the purposes of this article, A, B, and C languages are defined as follows:

- A = Native language or the language(s) the interpreter is most proficient in (target language);

- B = Second active language(s) that the interpreter may work into with near-native proficiency (target language); and
- C = Passive language(s) from which the interpreter may work from A and B, but does not work into (source language).

During the Third Summit of Heads of State of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the European Union, there were interpreters with various combinations: those who only worked from their B into their A language; those who worked both from their B as well as their C into their A language; those who had a double A (considered to be native or near-native enough to merit an A) in two working languages, along with a B or a C in a third language; and those who had a double A, but no B or C language. For this particular summit, the traditional four official languages for high-level meetings held in the Americas were used: Spanish, English, Portuguese, and French.

To ensure adequate coverage, a practice known as relay interpreting is often employed at such meetings. Holly Mikkelson has stated that “relay interpreting is necessary when more than two languages are involved in an interpreted event and no single interpreter commands all of the languages, or when no interpreter can be found in a given language combination” (Ref. 4). In the same article, Mikkelson offers an example, provided by Agnes Subiros Matheson (Ref. 3), that illustrates the relay interpreting process during a hypothetical conference of widget makers, in which the working languages are French, English, and Spanish.

Let us say that the French CEO of Widget Makers de France is addressing the audience in French. Booth #1 is interpreting from French into Spanish for all conference attendees and panel members from Spain. Booth #2 does not listen directly to the speaker, but instead, using the relay switch, is listening to the interpreter in Booth #1, who is interpreting into Spanish. Then the interpreter in Booth #2 proceeds to interpret from Spanish into English for conference attendees and panel members who need to listen to the English interpretation.

Of course, relay interpreting is not without its challenges, and it is imperative that those organizing conference interpreting services be aware of the possible issues involved. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), in its publication *Practical Guide for Professional Conference Interpreters*, warns of the pitfalls involved in using relay interpretation, and recommends its use be restricted:

“In relay interpreting the ‘pivot’ (i.e., the interpreter the other booths are listening to and taking relay from) has a very special responsibility. Apart from those delegates who are listening to the original, everybody else at the meeting is relying on the pivot to deliver the speaker’s message. When you are a pivot, all the principles of quality interpreting apply, of course, and a good pivot is, first and foremost, a good interpreter. However, the pivot must also make a special effort to interpret with the needs of colleagues in mind, and to be maximally clear and helpful” (Ref. 1).

Let me provide a concrete example of the problems relay interpreting can create. My combination is A (English), B (Spanish), and C (Portuguese), which means that I will work from my B and C languages into my A language. However, what happens if I am at an event where French is being spoken on the floor? If this situation occurred, I would have to resort to relaying from either the Spanish or Portuguese interpreting booth, or else my boothmate would have to take over (as long as he or she was someone whose B or C language was French). To the wise reader, a red flag immediately appears. Suppose my colleague is out of the booth for whatever reason when the French speaker is on the floor? This is not a problem if I am properly paired with the interpreter in the Spanish booth who interprets from French. However, if the colleague who only interprets from Portuguese is on the microphone at the same time I am, there will be a total breakdown of communication since we will both be trying to relay from each other, thereby leaving the French uncovered!

Thus, the importance of organizing interpreters by languages, paying particular attention to any challenges that relay interpretation might present, and assuring adequate coverage for each language. One technique to accomplish this is to assign strict timeslots when each interpreter is “on” so as to avoid major mishaps. Remember, you *cannot* leave the booth under any circumstances during these specified time periods, not even to heed the calls of Mother Nature, so be careful with beverage consumption!

The Chief Interpreter

Let us now focus on the role of the all-essential, but often beleaguered, chief interpreter, who is a crucial presence before, during, and after the conference. Among many other responsibilities, this individual must foresee and plan for possible contingencies in all rooms where interpretation will take place. It goes without saying that adequate coverage must be ensured (which, at the summit in Mexico, meant having some 20 interpreters working at any given time). Programming changes and the addition of a language at a session can play havoc with the best planning, and assignments have to be juggled according to the chief interpreter’s best judgment.

Assuming that interpreters have been pre-selected based mainly on language combinations, the chief interpreter must then take into account how knowledgeable each interpreter is about the issues being discussed at the meeting, how well they handle regional accents, etc. To give you an example of how the chief interpreter at the summit in Mexico would delegate interpreting responsibilities, let me again use myself as an example. Having learned my Portuguese in Brazil, being married to a Brazilian, and being somewhat immersed in the culture, it is much easier for me to interpret from Brazilian Portuguese than from Continental Portuguese from Portugal or the other African and Asian varieties. This explains why I would most likely be assigned mainly to interpret for the preliminary Latin American-Caribbean sessions and not at the preliminary European sessions, which would have a larger component of French and Continental Portuguese. I could also interpret at the plenary sessions, where I could serve as a relay from Portuguese into English. A wise chief interpreter will take the individual strengths and weaknesses of each interpreter into account when making assignments.

But how do you decide which interpreters work best together? As interpreters, we admit to being high-strung and somewhat temperamental individuals (we’re often called prima donnas by outsiders, much to our distress) who do not work equally well or, in

some cases, refuse to work at all with certain individuals. Thus, the plot thickens for the poor chief interpreter, who, in addition to his or her other duties, must also consider possible personality clashes (you do not want to place arch enemies in close quarters), not to mention possible technical and human physical impairments. One can imagine the overwhelming task the chief interpreter faces when deciding how to designate the teams.

Much of this planning *has* to be done in advance, but unforeseen illnesses and poor performances, aggravated by the addition of extra sessions, the replacement of one speaker by another of a different language, and other last-minute mishaps can upset even the best scheme. As a result, the chief interpreter must often redistribute his human resources, sometimes to the distress of the interpreters (as well as to the detriment of the quality of language services) who studied for certain sessions and are now being changed at the last minute.

Another important role the chief interpreter has to fulfill is the procurement of documents. Hopefully, this has been done in advance of the event so that interpreters can better prepare. Nowadays this information is more readily accessible online through glossaries, websites containing background information on the conference, previous related events, and preparatory documents.

In addition, it is most helpful to have the names of the participants available, since official nametags are not always within sight, depending on the layout of the meeting room, and it is often hard to catch these names when they are rattled off by an inconsiderate chairman whose rate of speech might make it difficult to figure out who is being recognized.

Even more important is to have the latest versions of the documents you will be working with, since when it is very difficult to interpret complicated jargon when it is read at a fast pace, much less second guess what changes the drafting committee has made in the original documents. Simultaneous interpretation is designed to be a faithful rendition of ideas, but not of style changes in writing. Without the latest version in hand, the interpreted version will not match the polished written version provided by the drafting committee. It goes without saying that the final declaration in the target language must be available for all interpreters in the booths to ensure coherence with the version in the hands of the delegates.

The chief interpreter and his or her assistants will do their best to procure the most recent documents, but it is also the responsibility of the booth interpreters to cover any shortcomings they may foresee. Of course, there are limits to what can be done, since interpreters simply can't go running around indefinitely looking for the most up-to-date documentation. Getting information is often hindered by security measures, especially at high-level events, that prevent interpreters from having direct access to documents before the session. In the event of a discrepancy between the interpreter and the speaker, the chief interpreter must be prepared to field complaints and ascertain whether or not a misunderstanding was actually the fault of the interpreter and how serious it was. The results could affect future hiring, and verification of the facts must be done to avoid injustice to the interpreter.

A final responsibility that could fall to the chief interpreter, and one more reason why a good one can make all the difference in the world, is the payment of staff. As we all know, interpreters like to be paid, and promptly! How fast interpreters are paid often depends on whether the chief interpreter was a colleague designated by the organization

in charge of the event (in which case, his job normally ends with the conference), or whether he is a staff member at the hiring agency. If it is the latter, than this individual will most likely be involved in the follow-up procedure of calculating overtime, travel vouchers, expedient payment, etc. While most interpreters will not refuse to work with certain chief interpreters since this could greatly restrict their possibility of being hired, we all prefer those who have been fair in the distribution of working hours, make logical booth assignments, and show concern for getting the proper documentation to you in a timely fashion.

Conclusion

What can we conclude from this article? More than an attempt to arrive at concrete conclusions, it was written to draw the reader's attention to the nature of high-level diplomatic conferences (in this case, the Third Summit of Heads of State from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the European Union), and in particular to the increasingly important role of the chief interpreter, who is truly a key player in conference organization. In a cursory review of the literature before writing this article, not much was found regarding this individual. Do interpreters and researchers not feel, as I do, that this role is a strategic one which contributes enormously to the success or failure of an international event? Hopefully any comments received by readers of this article will provide more food for thought on what I consider to be an important subject in conference interpretation.

References

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Pull-Quote:

“...The chief interpreter’s role is also not limited to planning, recruiting, and overseeing interpreting services during the event...”

Abstract:

This article deals with simultaneous interpreting services at a specific high-level diplomatic event and stresses the key role played by the chief interpreter.

Bio:

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