



COATI

Colectivo para la Autogestión de Tecnologías para la Interpretación

Collective For the Self-organisation of
Interpreting Technologies

*For copies of this flyer in other languages
and related links and resources contact

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or visit the website

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Resistance is international: we come together from different struggles and cultures to meet, share ideas and experiences, and coordinate actions. Crossing borders and cultures also means crossing language barriers. This flyer is for anyone planning or participating in a gathering where not everyone speaks the same language.

1. Why think about language?

Most international gatherings take place in the more 'international' languages such as English, Spanish, Russian or French. More people speak these languages because they have long histories of imperialism. They were forcibly, and often brutally imposed on people from many different cultures.

People participating in a meeting in a foreign language are often reluctant to contribute to discussions, because they are unsure if they have understood everything correctly, or they are not confident about expressing themselves.

People who are participating in the meeting through interpreters are often unable to fully participate because they have the delay of the interpreting and the meeting goes too fast for them to contribute. So, meetings are often dominated by people who are comfortable with the main language of the meeting. Native speakers of these languages (particularly English) have dominated history and continue to dominate meetings.

Language is about power. It is therefore an important political struggle to increase the equality of our communication and create space for more minority languages. There are some really basic things we can do when planning, facilitating and participating in multi-language meetings to work towards this.

2. Interpreting

If no common language can be found, then you may need to use interpreting. This is live translation of what is being said in the meeting from one language to another. Often people participating in a gathering or meeting speak several languages, and can volunteer to translate what is being said if needed. However, this can be a very difficult process and it is always very hard work for the interpreters. If you think interpreting will be needed, be responsible about it and think about it in advance.

There are a number of different ways to provide interpreting for a meeting (briefly outlined here). Each method has its pros and cons. Decisions about how to structure interpreting can seriously affect the practical reality of the meeting.

2.1 Simultaneous or Conference Interpreting

This is the kind of interpreting used at the UN or the EU Parliament. Interpreters sit in soundproofed booths with headsets and microphones and interpret only a few seconds behind the orator. Participants listen to their chosen language through headsets.

This is ideal for equal participation. If the interpreter is good, all participants hear what is said at more or less the same time, in the language of their choice.

The main problem is that it requires a technological infrastructure: booths and complex sound technology for interpreters to listen to the meeting in one language and transmit to listeners in another language.

Interpreting systems can be professionally hired but they are very expensive. Some very good alternative projects (see links) have produced self-made conference interpreting systems for activist events. However, these still require a lot of pre-planning, sound technicians, and often cost money.

2.2 Chuchotage or “whispering”

The room is divided into different language groups, and an interpreter listens to the meeting and “whispers” (often actually shouts) the interpreting to her or his section of the room.

Like conference interpreting, this has the advantage of being simultaneous. It is a low-tech, low-budget solution, and is often used in activist meetings.

However, there are some important considerations. Firstly, this is the most difficult method for the interpreter, having to listen to the meeting and speak at the same time without the aid of a soundproofed booth or amplification and headsets. The acoustics (background noise etc) in the room become extra-important. Also, be realistic about how many people someone can “whisper” to – the louder the interpreter has to speak, the harder it is to hear the speaker over the sound of their own voice.

If you decide you want to use chuchotage interpreting on a low budget, look at the space you have, numbers of people, number of available interpreters, available technology and amplification, etc... and try to develop your own room arrangements, combinations and solutions: **be creative!**

It is also important to note that this kind of interpreting can lead to people being marginalised, especially when there is a majority language, and a small group huddled round an interpreter in the corner. It is therefore important for the meeting facilitator and/or participants to be aware of this dynamic and work to make sure people are not excluded in this way.

2.3 Consecutive Interpreting

This is where the speaker says one or two sentences, and then the interpreter repeats them in another language, speaking to the whole meeting. This form of interpreting is useful when there is a speaker who speaks a language other than the majority language in the meeting.

You may also decide to use consecutive interpreting for an entire multi-lingual meeting, particularly when the number of participants in the meeting makes “whispering” impractical.

This also has the advantage of linguistic equality: everyone in the room hears what is said in every language. However, this also means that the meeting takes twice as long if there are two languages, five times as long if there are five, etc...

It also requires considerable discipline from meeting participants. It is important that speakers pause regularly to allow the interpreters to translate what they have said – they can hold so much in their memory at any one time!

Also, people must not respond to what has been said in one language before it has been translated into another. When topics become controversial, consecutive interpreting often collapses amid interruptions and heated debates that only one section of the room understands.

Whether you use simultaneous or consecutive interpreting will also depend on your volunteers. Some people find simultaneous interpreting very difficult. It requires a good grasp of the language and intense concentration to be able to listen to one language and speak in another at the same time. Others find consecutive interpreting more difficult as it requires a good memory to be able to listen to someone talk, remember what they said, and repeat it in another language.

3. Tips for speaking in multi-language meetings

**Speak slowly!
Speak clearly!
Speak loudly!**

Make sure people can see you

It is much easier to understand what someone is saying if you can see their mouth moving.

Stand up. Make sure people (especially interpreters) can see your face if possible.

Think about the words you use

If you are speaking your mother tongue, remember that people may be listening to you who do not understand the language so well. This is particularly important for mother-tongue English speakers. Try to use "International English".

- * use short sentences**
- * use simple words**
- * avoid slang**

Take care to say special details clearly (e.g. names, dates, acronyms, places etc.)

Don't interrupt!

Respect is extra important in multi-language meetings because when several people speak at the same time it becomes impossible to understand or translate.

4. Tips for planning a multi-language workshop, meeting or gathering

What languages to use? You will want to think about what languages the participants can speak, but also issues of power and local sensitivities (for example oppressed minority languages and linguistic struggles).

Room layout: It is important that everyone can see each other when they are speaking, and especially important that interpreters can see the speakers.

Background noise: This can be a big problem for communication, especially in meetings outdoors or near airports, hospitals and fire stations, railways etc. Try to find quiet places for meetings. If possible, avoid spaces where many other things are happening.

Meeting structure: Having a clear structure to the discussion or workshop makes it easier for people to follow. It is much easier to understand something in a language you don't speak so well if you know what is being talked about.

Write things up for everyone to see: write up the agenda for the meeting and key points as the discussion progresses. This helps people to follow what is being talked about.

Think about language when planning the structure of a workshop or meeting. For example, if you break the meeting into small groups, how will that work with languages and interpreting?

Decision making: It is a problem for any meeting to be dominated by people who are comfortable with the main language of the meeting, but it is particularly important to consider this power imbalance in consensus decision making processes that seem open and equal, but may be excluding people because of language.

4.1 Respect your interpreters!

All the advice given in the first section about how to speak in multi-language meetings is extra important when people listening to the meeting through interpreters.

How you can help:

- **Make sure there are enough interpreters:** don't expect one person to work non-stop for hours on end! Professional interpreters usually work in pairs, 20 minutes on, 20 minutes off. If you have interpreters working alone, **make space for them to take breaks!** If not, the quality of the interpreting suffers, which is unfair on the participants who need it to follow the discussion.
- **Prepare in advance:** give the interpreters copies of any relevant written materials such as the meeting agenda, minutes of previous meetings, speakers' notes etc.
- **Room layout:** Make sure interpreters are placed so they can see the faces of all the speakers.
- **Work together:** Involve the interpreters in the planning and facilitation of the meeting, and in structuring the interpreting. Whether you use simultaneous or consecutive interpreting, for example, may depend on the wishes your interpreters!

**It's very hard work, and they are
volunteers, not machines!**

5. Tips for interpreters

Before the session starts:

- **Have a (working) pen and paper to take notes**
- **Have water** You will talk more than anyone else in the meeting!
- **Remember to go to the toilet**
- **Take something to eat** like a banana, cereal bar or nuts, interpreting burns a lot of calories!
- **Prepare in advance** if you can, know what the meeting will be about and make a list of speakers names, organisations, useful terms, etc. Find out what languages will be used in the meeting.

During the session:

- **Relax!** You are a volunteer doing the best of a very difficult job in what are usually very difficult conditions.
- **Breathe deeply, sit comfortably**, avoid tensing all your muscles.
- **Take breaks.** Normal work time for a professional is 20 minutes on, 20 minutes off. Don't feel you have anything to prove: if you are too tired after 5 or 10 minutes, rotate on a more frequent basis. If working alone, don't hesitate to ask for a few minutes break when smoke start coming out of your ears... you are a voluntary activist, not a machine!!
- **Be assertive!** You are working as a volunteer and you should expect solidarity from speakers and audience. People (especially those who do not require interpreting) may need reminding of this. Explain to the meeting that you are interpreting and how people can help you.

5.1 If you don't understand something

☺ **DON'T PANIC!** ☺

The most important thing is not to get flustered and lose your concentration. Everyone misses some things.

If people are talking too fast, too long or too quietly, remind them that you are interpreting. If you are working from a booth over headphones, you could ask someone listening to you to remind the speaker to speak slowly and clearly. It is a matter of respect for you and for the people who are participating in the meeting through your interpreting.

If you are doing consecutive interpreting and you don't understand something the speaker has said, you can ask for clarification. It is better to ask before you start speaking, rather than interrupt yourself when you get to the tricky bit.

**And don't be too hard on yourself:
even professionals have bad days...**

Important political note for interpreters:

Remember, you are in a powerful position. Try not to let your own opinions manipulate what you are translating.

5.2 Working as a team

It is a tiring and stressful task, in which it is vital to remain calm and concentrated. Working together as a team is therefore vitally important. Solidarity between the interpreters and the audience, and between the interpreters themselves is therefore key to making it enjoyable.

It is worth getting together before the meeting starts, and working out how to support each other given the limitations set by the space, equipment, number of interpreters, language combinations etc.

If you can, help each other with note taking and take turns to interpret, to give yourselves a break. Have a sign to get your partner to take over if you're worn out.

If speakers refer to names and numbers, jot them down so your colleague can see them and use them if they need to. If your partner has difficulty with a word that you know, write it down so they can see it.

Decide who will go first: introductions and names are often the hardest part. Show respect your fellow interpreters, give people space to learn and don't hog the microphone.

Share experience and help each other to learn.

Some speakers are easier to interpret than others. Even a professional can have trouble with accents, whereas a less experienced colleague might well understand the speaker perfectly. There is no loss of face in handing over or in asking for help. Remember: there are people out there who need to understand, and your role is to facilitate, not to prove any point. That's why we all try to facilitate to the best of our ability.

5.3 Training yourself as an Interpreter

Once you can speak and understand more than one language, the most important aspect of being an effective interpreter is emotional self-control, and the ability to stay calm, concentrate and think clearly under stress.

However, listening and talking at the same time, remembering and repeating long pieces of text and taking fast and useful notes are not necessarily things you do in everyday life, so here are some ideas for working in pairs or groups, or using TV or Radio news, and newspaper articles to get some practice of these skills:

- ❖ Write a word for each letter A-Z while listening to a text, then write a summary of the text you have heard.
- ❖ Listen to one text, while you read another, and then summarise both.
- ❖ A text is read aloud to a group. The group then repeats it line by line. The first person remembers first sentence, the second person first and second, third person first second and third etc... until whole text is repeated.
- ❖ Read an article and translate it out loud as you read.
- ❖ Work in pairs, or from the TV and shadow the speaker. You can make this exercise increasingly difficult:
 - 1) shadow in native language
 - 2) shadow in target language
 - 3) shadow but PARAPHRASE in native language
 - 4) shadow but PARAPHRASE in target language
 - 5) interpret from target language to source/native language
 - 6) interpret from source/native language to target language

6. LINKS AND RESOURCES

Network of volunteer activist interpreters

Babels

Babels is a network of volunteer activist interpreters and translators that fights for the right of all, including those who don't speak a colonial language, to express themselves in the language of their choice: by increasing the diversity of contributions to the debate, we transform its outcome.

Website includes training resources, lexicons and the opportunity to get involved in different projects (in many languages):

www.babels.org

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Alternative Interpreting Technology

COATI

Colectivo para la Autogestion de las Tecnologias para la Interpretacion (Collective for the Self-organisation of Interpreting Technologies, based in Europe)

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meeting facilitation

seeds for change

Resources, training and support for grassroots campaigners and community groups on meeting facilitation, consensus decision making and other aspects of non-hierarchical organising. (in English)

<http://seedsforchange.org.uk/>