

INTERPRETERS' HANDOUT



WHO IS THIS HANDOUT FOR?

For volunteer interpreters supporting an event such as an activist camp, conference or similar. It should give you some tips and basic notions around how best to support each other as interpreters, and do the best job possible with the interpretation itself. It is however not exhaustive! There will be plenty of other advice out there, be it from your own or other people's experiences.

WHY DO WE INTERPRET?

Language can be a very invisible (and invisibilized) barrier. It contributes to determining who has access to which space, who will feel comfortable in it and who will contribute to it. Not addressing language as a barrier can lead to spaces de facto excluding people who don't feel quite confident in a common international language spoken at the event (often not their mother tongue) and a self-reproduction of oppressive realities that can be based on, or at the intersection of, many factors and identities. While more often than not in activist spaces it is not possible to offer interpreting in all languages, we want to do our maximum to 1) accommodate for requests made in a timely manner and 2) proactively anticipate needs and accessibility to the best of our capacities. We believe in people's right to express themselves in their mother tongue or at least in a language they feel comfortable in, and which provides them with the agency to share their thoughts and experience.



STEP BY STEP



Basic preparation

Have a pen and paper. Do not arrive last minute, but 10-15 minutes beforehand. Make sure you drink and eat enough throughout the day. Interpreting is demanding, and how you physically and mentally are doing will heavily influence the quality of your interpretation. Do not leave open bottles or glasses close to the equipment.



Interpretation

- ✓ Remember that you are here as a volunteer, to support – you will most probably not get 100% of what is being said and that is normal. To take some pressure off yourself remember that, if you weren't here, the people relying on your interpreting would get 0% of what is happening.
- ✓ Remember to breathe, take small breaks from time to time. Sometimes putting a hand on your chest or belly can help you remember to breathe.
- ✓ Focus on finishing your sentences as much as possible, it will help you catch your breath and help your listeners' brains keep up.
- ✓ On average a good distance to the speaker while interpreting is half a sentence behind (meaning you are translating what the speaker said around half a sentence ago). However, depending on the languages you're working with, how comfortable you are with a variety of factors, you might be closer or further away.
- ✓ Do some preparatory research when possible (see below) on the topic(s) you will be interpreting.

That being said, a couple of important principles:

- ✗ Do not invent – if you didn't hear or understand what is being said, it is better to say nothing, or to simply honestly tell your listeners that you missed some info, and then keep going with your interpretation.
- ✗ Do not refuse to translate something you do not agree with. While this can be very painful, as interpreters we are here to support the equal participation of all people in attendance to everything that is happening. If we don't translate the things we don't agree with, we are cutting them out from the situation and others.

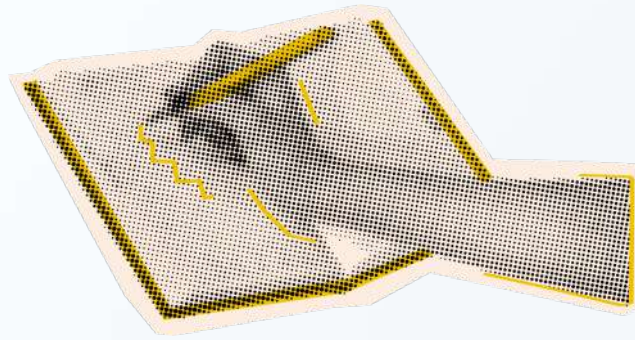
WORKING IN TEAMS



As volunteer interpreters, we should never work alone, but always in pairs. This might be a struggle against organizers (who often have to deal with too many requests and not enough interpreters) or yourself (feeling that you prefer working alone, or that it's no bother for you to do the whole session on your own). A word on feeling like you can or would prefer to work alone: please be mindful that you are supporting, as an interpreter, to help the event. Professional interpreters rarely go for more than 20 to 30 minutes "rounds" before handing over the microphone to their colleague. Even if you don't notice it, your ability to translate in a way that is useful to the people listening to you will decrease with time, and you simply won't be doing a good job anymore.

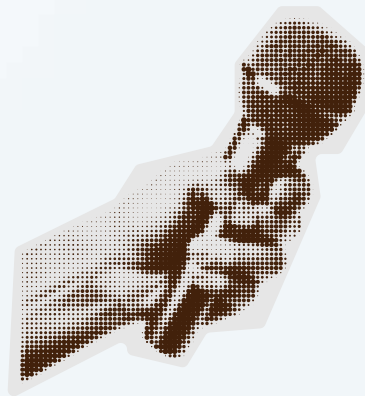
Here are a few good basic principles to work together:

➤ Ahead of time: if possible, team up for preparation work like asking organizers for relevant documents, looking up videos of speakers available online and/or making vocabulary lists around the topic you'll be interpreting.



➤ Take the time to do a check in with your co-interpreter before the session about:

- 1) languages, and the language direction preferences of your “co-terp”.
- 2) if they would like you to take notes for them while they interpret (names, dates, numbers...) on a piece of paper put between both of you (if you have a table).
- 3) how often they want to switch (every 10, 15, 20 minutes?) and how to switch (hand gesture, reminding each other of the time, etc.). You can also decide to switch depending on the language direction or every time a new speaker takes the floor.
- 4) terms, names, other relevant information you both might have collected in the lead-up to the interpretation.
- 5) if they would like you to give them constructive feedback once the session is done.



- Never grab the microphone from your co-terp, even if you feel they’re doing a bad job or struggling. At the same time, do not hold on to the microphone beyond the agreed time or at all cost. These two things can create a lot of stress and tensions, and come in the way of the interpretation.
- Take time to debrief after the interpretation, even just a few minutes, to see how you both feel. Be constructive in giving feedback to each other, and supportive in co-learning. We learn through each other.

WORKING AS PART OF AN EVENT



You might interpret with or without equipment. If you're using a spider or a wireless set ("tourist guide set"), and you're not receiving the floor input in headphones, but from the room, consider where you're sitting in the room. Ideally, position yourself diagonal from the speaker, with a direct view to them but not too close to a sound system (to avoid the sound reaching your microphone) nor to the speaker (to not disturb them), and at the same time close enough that you can hear well. Don't hesitate to do some sound testing before the start of the discussion. In an ideal situation, you get to meet and talk with the speakers ahead of the event, so that you can ask them about their topic, and also warn them that you're not professionals and they should be mindful of not speaking too fast or with too many technical terms or abbreviations, if they want their message to get across to the audience. It's in their best interest too!

In any case, make yourself known to the sound technicians, organizers and the speakers latest 10-15 min before the session starts.

More often than not, people will not be aware that there will be interpretation, so this is a much needed heads-up. Introduce yourselves, explain what you'll be doing, formulate some basic requests (speak clearly, in the microphone, not too fast etc.), and ask them for any final details you are unsure about. Especially as an interpreter, it is OK to ask people of whom you will say the name how to correctly pronounce their names.

Check if an organizer or the facilitator of the panel can regularly check on you visually to see if the speakers are not going too fast, if you and your co-terp are managing etc.

Agree on hand signals you can use to let them know if you are encountering issues. If no one can do that job, then the person who is not interpreting in your pair is in charge of walking up to the sound technicians or the panel to tell them if things are not going well. It can be intimidating but it helps to remember that, without good sound and adequate speed, you won't be able to help them get their message across!

Finally, remember that you are the same as any activist part of the event; do not accept abuse from participants or organizers because they think you didn't do good enough a job. Be polite, accept that they are not feeling happy and leave space for what they experienced, but set your own boundaries too. In case things escalate, you can refer them to the interpreters team coordinator. That person should be able to explain to them the challenges and limitations of volunteer interpretation.



THE POLYG'LOTTA COLLECTIVE AND THE MOVEMENT HUB



The Polyg'lotta collective is a network of volunteer activist interpreters mostly (but not only) based in French-speaking Western European countries. Created in 2024, it works to ensure that language is not an invisible barrier to international organizing and exchange, which would reinforce existing systems of oppression.

The Movement Hub empowers anyone fighting for that is livable and just for all – by providing a platform for learning and sharing stories, tools and techniques. Whether you're an activist who fought injustice or climate breakdown for decades, a young member of a grassroots group, or even a changemaker working alone – we have something to offer you.

www.themovementhub.org

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