

## The In-house Interpreting Environment: 'Issues galore'

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*This paper focuses on 3 real life issues relating to business interpreting in an in-house environment: **interpreter integrity, the right to information, and hindered communication**. These 3 issues were chosen as they are somewhat challenging and awkward with no easy solutions; but, on the other hand, if not addressed make life very difficult for the interpreter and in some cases could set a precedence in the in-house interpreting environment. The paper argues that the interpreter needs to be in charge in all interpreting situations to drive the meeting, and needs to uphold the principles of the art of interpreting while at the same time maintain interpreter integrity. Furthermore, in light of the fact that more and more foreign companies are 'doing deals' with Japanese companies, good interpreters could be said to be in demand. Hence, addressing these issues and maintaining the quality of the service is of utmost importance.*

### **Introduction**

Many people face a range of issues in their daily working and private life and interpreters are no exception. Do you or don't you correct a speaker, even when you know he/she has clearly got it wrong; explain and clarify for the speaker or audience cultural issues and/or implications that may not be clear to the speaker/audience as they present themselves? -- etc. What do you do when your **integrity** as an interpreter is at stake? I will paint some pictures of real life in-house interpreting situations where these types of challenging and quite problematical issues arise, and propose logical solutions. <sup>1)</sup>

### **Interpreter integrity at any cost?**

#### **To use or not to use a digital voice recorder . . .**

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Digital voice recorders, for the purpose of recording meetings and those used by journalists have since, on becoming available in the market place, taken off quite rapidly amongst those who know their potential. They have become more lightweight and portable, and the change from tape recorder to digital now allows the user to deploy data into a PC and edit, store, file, print and e-mail that data.

The recorder can be used for recording yourself when interpreting so as to allow you the opportunity to play back your own voice and improve intonation. You may also pick up on bad habits you may have when speaking. It also allows you to identify problems in your understanding of the topic as well as excessively slow speech or word repetitive type problems, etc. If used discreetly, it can also be used to protect **interpreter integrity**. In the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) code of practice, it states that:

*Interpreters and Translators shall maintain their integrity and independence at all times. 2)*

For an interpreter, using a recorder at a meeting, even with the permission of the participants, can be a turn-off for those participants. Participants are often cautious and sometimes negative at the thought. People are also hesitant in having their words recorded, I believe, for the following reason:

- In an in-house environment where there are fewer formalities, the speakers are more often than not unprepared when they verbalise their thoughts. Their thoughts are sometimes not completely formulated and in no logical order. It is possible that they also believe that a recorded version of their words may be used against them at a later stage. This theory is still not proven because if they were to clearly state that this is their concern, it would bring doubt onto themselves, as they may be seen to be trying to hide the truth.

This phenomenon is less likely to occur in an international or large conference situation where those presenting have more often than not pre-prepared their speech, and recording is somewhat common practice.

In the in-house business interpreting environment, many meetings are with a

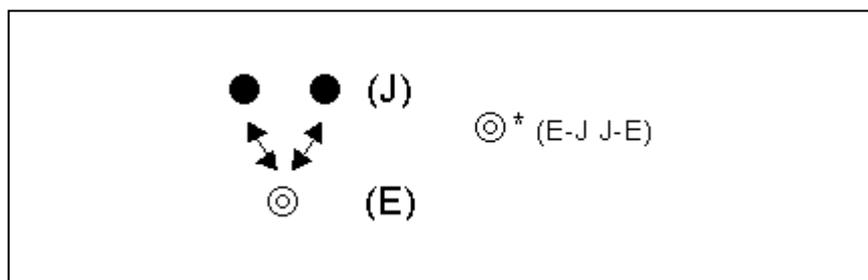
customer, and much of the discussion is kept behind closed doors. Money is behind a lot of deals, and the situation can be very sensitive. Here I would like to paint my first picture.

**The setting:** A meeting with representatives of a company and their customer.

**Style of interpreting:** Consecutive/non technical subject matter

**Key:** (J) = Japanese speaking audience (E) = English speaking audience/person

\* One Interpreter (native English speaker)



In this commonly seen setting, it is quite possible that both parties in various forms and levels will disclose sensitive information. Usually for this reason, recording of the meeting is not allowed in the event that information is purposely or accidentally leaked. However,

*Disclosure of information may be permissible with client's agreement or when disclosure is mandated by law. <sup>3)</sup>*

In the course of the meeting, a point is made by one of the participants in English, and then later on, clarification of this point is requested by a Japanese participant through the interpreter who's native language is English. The interpreter interprets the (J) participant's request. The original speaker, upon hearing the interpreter, denies having made the original comment, regardless of the fact that the interpreter has taken notes.

In this scenario, it is unlikely that the interpreter misunderstood a point made in his/her native language, so it can be said that either the participant making the original point, forgot that he/she made it, or it was a slip of the tongue, which to the fortune of the original speaker could be covered up and blamed on a mis-interpretation. In this case, the interpreter's **integrity** is at stake. Interpreter integrity is important for the following reasons:

1. On the whole, interpreters are employed to bridge the communication gap between parties with different languages and cultures. If the interpreter is to effectively carry out the role, he/she needs to be trusted by those they provide a service to, as without this trust, the interpreter's task of bridging the gap of communication is blanketed in a veil of scepticism towards the interpreter, which does not make for effective communication.
2. It is in the interpreters own interest to have a strong trust relationship with the buyer of interpreting services, as a trusted interpreter has a better chance of obtaining follow up work than one who has lost trust with the customer.

There is no way to prove that the interpreter is innocent unless . . . a recording of the meeting was made.<sup>4)</sup> This is the first moral question that interpreters must ask themselves. Should the use of digital recorders be allowed in order to 'play back the point' when this type of discrepancy occurs (which could make the original speaker in some cases appear foolish) or should the interpreter accept the responsibility to save face for the participant and hence, in some cases, lose 'trust' with the customer . . . resulting inevitably in professional suicide?

I believe that without the customer's trust, it is only a matter of time before the interpreter is replaced. In a business environment, interpreting incorrectly can mean a mistake, in some cases worth a considerable amount of money. It is in the interpreter's interest that he/she is **trusted** by the customer and by all participants. Interpreters can very easily become a scapegoat and so must stand by their integrity. If this means recording a meeting in case discrepancies arise, then this can be deleted at the conclusion of the meeting in the presence of the participants. This should be strongly but discreetly proposed for the benefit of all.

### **The right to information**

For the benefit of perspective, this illustration is one that relates to the fundamental right to information by all participants in a meeting.

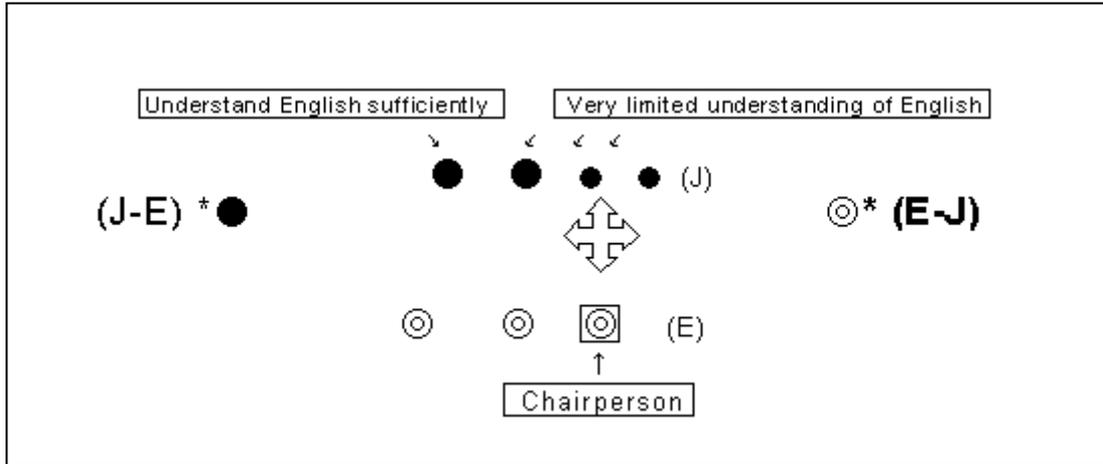
**The setting:** A meeting with Japanese and their Western counterparts.

**Style of interpreting:** Consecutive/semi technical

**Key:** (J) = Japanese speaking audience

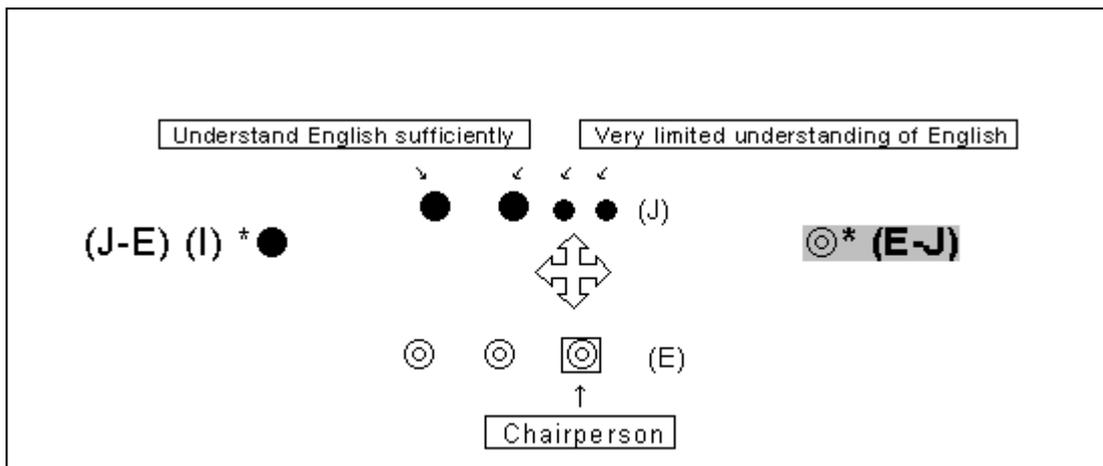
(E) = English speaking audience/person

- \* Interpreter (native English speaker on right)
- \* Interpreter (native Japanese speaker on left)



In this scenario, the chairperson is aware that some people in the audience understand English to different degrees, and for the purpose of saving time, chooses not to have English to Japanese interpreting provided for the Japanese audience. (This is a real life example whereby the interpreters were asked to interpret into their non-native language.)

Key: \* (E-J) = Interpreter asked not to interpret.



It is most probably the case that those who understand English can pick up parts of the conversation but not all. To deny interpreting into Japanese denies the participants the right to information.

I believe that in this case (which I have faced in my experience), the interpreter has an **obligation** to ensure that all participants present have the same access to information, but this is only half the battle. The interpreter should ensure that the chairperson allows the participants to request interpreting if necessary; however, this **should not** be a decision made solely by the chairperson. The interpreter knows more about the intricacies and complexities of communication in this environment, presumably better than the chairperson, and should set the scene for the meeting.

A simple example of this is: A lawyer presumably knows more about the law than his/her client. It would not be expected that a lawyer would take the advice of his/her client and act from it simply because the client is paying them. The lawyer is seen to be the law professional, and presumably knows best when it comes to law; hence the lawyer takes charge of the situation. This should be no different in the case of an interpreter. <sup>5)</sup>

Unfortunately, in reality, the chairperson is rarely fully aware of interpreting issues, and hence cannot make correct decisions when it comes to judging the necessity for interpreting. Also, in most cases, the Japanese participants do not frankly reveal their level of English, and give vague nods, which to the chairperson means that they **understand**, when in actual fact there may be times when they don't. It is part of an interpreter's expertise to judge from the participants' body language and level of participation as to whether or not interpreting is required; however, this is in some cases denied by the chairperson. There should be no exceptions, and it is an unfortunate interpreter who is put in this situation.

I would like to conclude with an illustration of one more 'challenging' issue.

### **Hindered communication**

The diagram below describes this phenomenon, which is on the rise in the business world amongst Japanese business people.

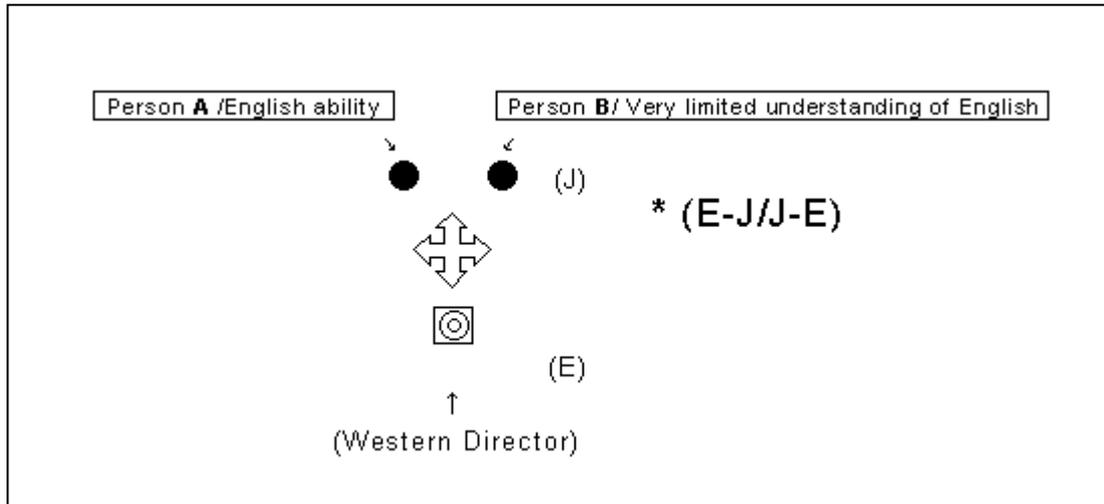
**Background:** In this day and age, more and more Japanese business people are dealing with western English speakers. There are Japanese business people who are very proficient in English and those who are not. Japanese business people in some cases look forward to speaking with their western counterparts as a way of brushing up their English skills in the workplace. This works reasonably well when the Japanese Manager and western Manager speak one to one. In most cases, both parties do a lot of guess work to fill in the parts that they did not understand, and it could probably be said that both parties do not understand each other 100%. In this illustration, the Japanese business person's English is mediocre.

**Style of interpreting:** Consecutive/semi technical

**Key:** (J) = Japanese speaking audience

(E) = English speaking audience/person

\* Interpreter (native English speaker on right)



The above diagram paints a picture of a Japanese Manager *A* who can speak mediocre English, and his Japanese associate *B*, speaking with the western Director in an in-house situation. The Japanese Manager calls the meeting and requests the presence of the interpreter. The Japanese Manager wants to take the opportunity to speak in English to brush up his skills, and commences speaking. As it is dialogue interpreting, the interpreter tries to interpret in the **whispering mode** for *B*. However *A*'s English is broken, and the interpreter struggles to understand the points clearly enough to interpret in this mode for *B*. The western Director, out of politeness, does not interrupt *A* and presumably only understands about 60% of the English.

**Issue:** In this case, the interpreter is struggling to interpret broken English into Japanese. This is a sensitive situation for all, because the Manager's (*A*) English is on display and to disrupt the discussion to have *A* speak in Japanese instead could be embarrassing.

However, I believe that in this case the interpreter should be able to step in and stop the conversation, as adequate interpreting cannot be provided to the associate *B* who, as in issue 2, has the right to access information being a participant in the meeting. Practice of English by Japanese Managers and staff can be educational for the speaker themselves, but a nightmare for the interpreter. The interpreter is in the awkward position of having to either

choose to 'live with it' or embarrass the speaker by having him/her change to his/her native language. 6)

Unfortunately, in some cases, the interpreter can also hinder communication by not preventing a discussion from going around in circles, in the example where the interpreter can see that two parties are not picking up each others' points. In the AUSIT code of practice, however, it states that:

*Interpreters and translators shall not voice an opinion, solicited or unsolicited, on any matter or person in relation to an assignment. 7)*

It could be argued that an interpreter's role is to assist, not hinder communications, and hence this is rule is to harsh, but much debate is required by the interpreting industry if this fundamental rule is to be amended to perhaps read: Interpreters and translators shall **generally** not voice an opinion on any matter or person in relation to an assignment, unless the interpreter believes that the parties require assistance in order to progress communication.

## **Conclusion**

Interpreters are faced with morally challenging situations that are not simple to deal with. Business interpreters in in-house interpreting situations are working at the grass roots level where things are often gray. However it is the obligation of the interpreter as a 'communications specialist' to make a judgment on what is required in a situation, and this should be demonstrated in the case of all three issues raised. If the interpreter is in a situation where integrity is at risk, and does not completely attempt to fulfil his or her role with regards to communication, then the interpreter in my view is not doing justice to the job. The topic of recording meetings will not come to a conclusion overnight, and may not be able to be justified. Instead, perhaps those using interpreters must be de-briefed by the interpreter whenever possible on interpreting and the interpreter's role, at least so the participants are aware of possible issues.

In the case of the right to access information, it could be said that 'interpreters know best.' If they don't, as part of interpreter training and education, these types of role plays and scenarios could be very beneficial in enlightening the budding interpreter to the complexities of the role of in-house interpreter.

Access to information should not only be the right of the participants. Interpreters require information and pre-study material and should not be expected to spontaneously 'fit in' with a companies' directive in all cases. As an interpreter has a job to do, preparations should not fall victim to company

chaos.

Most business discussions have a money factor, and this can influence budgets and decision-making. An interpreter in an in-house interpreting situation is 'hired' for a period with a contract in place and a figure. However interpreters are sometimes not used to their full potential and the reasons can be political. These types of issues have no easy answer and should be taken up as issues of the utmost importance for interpreters in an in-house situation by those both practicing in the interpreting field and by interpreter education specialists. Steps should be taken to create standard interpreting rules for business interpreting in an in-house situation especially.

To my knowledge, there are no guidelines as such in place in the interpreting industry in Japan. As more and more Japanese and their western counterparts conduct deals in and out of Japan, the importance of standard guidelines for interpreting is increasing. The lack of understanding by the business world regarding interpreting just highlights the necessity for these issues to be discussed by a wider body of interpreters and business people, so that interpreters are allowed to do what they do best and customers reap the benefits creating a win-win situation.

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**Notes:**

- 1) These issues are addressed at not only buyers of interpreting services, but also other non-in-house interpreters. This is because, without the understanding and assistance from the service buyers, interpreters in the in-house environment alone cannot implement the required solutions easily, and interpreters who are not in the in-house interpreting environment may not be able to give constructive advice to their peers if they are not made aware of the issues.
- 2) *The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters*. (1995). Canberra ACT. Australian institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT). Code of Practice. Pg 3; Professional Conduct ( ).
- 3) *The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters*. (1995). Code of Practice. Pg4; Confidentiality ( ).
- 4) The assumption here is that no one in the meeting is willing or able to comment.

- 5) Interpreting is still not seen in the Japanese society (and some other societies) as a profession equal to the law or medical fields. The debate as to whether it should be also exists, and this is an issue that unfortunately is unable to be given due consideration in this paper.
- 6) I believe that this requires further examination by interpreters in the field, and a policy on interpreting in the in-house environment or set of interpreter guidelines to be created **by interpreters**, which can be used to educate buyers of interpreter services.
- 7) The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters. (1995). Code of Practice. Pg5; Impartiality ( ).