

CONFERENCE INTERPRETING IN ASIA

Jean-Pierre Allain

Ladies & Gentlemen, colleagues,

It is a great honour for me to have been invited to address this annual conference of the Japan Association for Interpreting and Translation Studies. I am not a theorist, a researcher or a professor. I am just a plain conference interpreter. I owe the honour to my friend Prof. Kondo Masaomi, whose ability as interpreter and as teacher I have come to admire over the many years that we have known each other.

Let me start by telling you a little about our profession and about myself. A few years back I was invited to address first year interpretation students at the University of Science Malaysia. Their teacher had sent me some questions in advance. These are the questions and my replies:

1. What made you choose to be an interpreter and how did you manage to get into this field?

I grew up with several languages. My mother is British, my father was French. I was born in Paraguay in a community of European immigrants where the majority was German so that German was the daily language. I went to primary school first in German, then English, then Spanish. Later my family moved from Paraguay to Brazil and I finished my highschool in Portuguese. Then I did a B.A. in Humanities, in Portuguese, Spanish, French and Latin at the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil. I also worked from age 16 on, mainly as multi-lingual secretary in different companies. At age 22 I decided I wanted to make use of my languages and to become an interpreter. My aim was to help nations understand each other. Like many young people, I was idealistic and thought the United Nations was a great thing.

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2. Could you name some obstacles or problems that you faced on your path to becoming an interpreter?

My main problem initially was financial. I come from a poor family and had to save the money needed to move from Brazil to Switzerland, where I enrolled in the Ecole d'Interprètes at the University of Geneva, and then to live there for several months. Later I found part-time jobs I could do while studying, that helped me finance my studies. Another challenge I faced when studying for interpretation is that I realized I needed to know much more about the world, about economic, political and social issues, so as to understand the speeches I was interpreting. So I decided to take a degree in economics while I was also studying for interpretation. I managed to finish my masters in economics one year after graduating as conference interpreter.

3. As an interpreter, what are the common problems that you face during interpreting and what other problems do you face that have to do with the interpreting world that you are in? How do you overcome all these problems?

Common problems that most interpreters and I find are

- a) Difficult speakers, e.g. those who speak a language other than their own and don't express themselves clearly. Nowadays many delegates are obliged to speak English at a conference, even though that is not their language.
- b) Difficult accents and ways of speaking of non-native speakers (mainly in English, but also in other languages).
- c) Lack of documents in the booth that are being read or discussed in the conference room.
- d) Poor sound reaching the interpreters.
- e) Wrong position of the interpreter booths in regard to the conference room, depriving interpreters of adequate visibility of the speakers, rostrum and screen.
- f) Poor lighting and ventilation in the booths.

4. Throughout your interpreting career, what has been the biggest challenge in interpreting?

The biggest challenge still is to get organizers to understand what simultaneous interpretation is, how it works, what it entails in terms of knowledge, linguistic ability

and stamina of interpreters. Most people wrongly believe that anybody who speaks two languages can interpret from one into the other. They fail to grasp that to do the job properly, interpreters need to understand immediately; they need to know what the discussion is about. Therefore they need information about the subject of the conference well before it starts and need to study and learn about the subject. You can only interpret what you understand. Interpretation is not transposing words from one language into another. It is explaining in another language and its cultural context what the speaker has just said.

5. While interpreting, what do you do when your mind suddenly goes blank or when you can't find the equivalent of what is being said?

It has never happened that my mind goes blank, but it happens quite often that you don't find the equivalent word for what is being said. However, if you understand what the speaker says you can find another way of saying the same thing in your own language. The main thing is that the interpreter must understand; and that's not only a question of language, but most often of substance.

6. Could you give us some tips on what we should do to improve our interpreting skills?

Assuming that your native language is Malay and your second language English, I would suggest:

- a) Spend at least two years in an English-language country. Don't go to a UK university and join a dormitory or flat with other Malaysians. Go and live with a local family who speak English. If you already have another profession, get a job in that country where you are forced to listen to and work in English all the time. Or, enroll in any kind of university course - not necessarily language course. Study economics, politics, arts, literature, biology, music, or any subject - but study in English surrounded by English speakers.
- b) Read English books and magazines. Listen to English radio and TV programs.
- c) Do translations from one language into another. That forces you to understand the subject you are translating and to consult dictionaries, search the Internet for information. It enriches your vocabulary.

7. Finally, in your opinion, besides being multilingual, what other skills should an excellent interpreter have?

- a) Preferably, at least one university degree in any subject other than languages, e.g. law, medicine, architecture, accounting, economics, politics, physics, etc.
- b) A quick and nimble mind. An alert intellect, open to learn new things. Curiosity about the world, people, sciences, arts. Interpreters must be aware of the news. At any meeting it is likely some speaker will allude to some recent event, possibly without describing it. The interpreter must understand what the speaker is alluding to, failing which he does not get the message. (A recent Japanese example: We must at all costs avoid a Sumo situation.)
- c) Be a good speaker: Know how to explain something in few words, but the right words. Speak clearly.
- d) Be a good team worker. Simultaneous interpretation is teamwork. You never work alone. You have to be able to get along with other people, especially in stressful situations.

The interpreter as communicator

From what I have told you, it may appear that my experience is different from yours. That is to say from the experience of Japanese interpreters, most of whom have grown up in a monolingual society and have learned one foreign language only. However, there is much we have in common.

I believe our role as interpreters is to be **communicators**. We communicate the ideas of speakers to our listeners. Notice that I do not say ‘we translate the ideas of speakers’. Of course, in a certain sense we do. But beyond that, what we try to achieve is to get across to listeners the ideas and not the words of speakers. There is a substantial difference. That is usually difficult for the public and clients to understand. They generally believe that interpreters ‘translate’ what is said. Hence the well-known confusion between translators and interpreters. I do not know whether in Japanese the public in general makes a distinction between these two professions, but I do know that in Asia generally, the distinction is not clear.

Putting into practice that ideal role of ‘communicator’ is not that simple. One may easily slip into the habit of merely transposing words from the source language into the output language. We can immediately recognize when an interpreter does this. It is what non-professional interpreters, call them amateurs, often do. If you listen to an amateur,

say a translator or a tour guide, in simultaneous interpretation, you will usually get a number of words – sometimes even sentences – that the speaker used, but you will fail to understand the message. In other words, communication is absent.

I find the best interpreters are those capable of listening to more than one sentence at a time, before rendering the meaning in the output language. At times, it may sound as though the interpreter were hesitant or looking for the right words. But listen to a whole speech interpreted by a good interpreter and you forget that it is interpreted; you take it as original.

One important aspect of our profession is **confidentiality**, which engenders trust. This is important for all meetings, but especially those at which confidential information is discussed. It is an important part of the AIIC Code of Ethics to which members have to subscribe. A colleague told me once about his experience in this regard.

He was approached by a law firm about an assignment, and after he agreed on the provisions of the contract, he was asked if he had any problem in signing a confidentiality agreement. “None at all,” he responded. “In fact, my professional association has a clause on secrecy in its code of ethics.” The client called back a little later to say that, having read the AIIC Code of Ethics, he did not consider it necessary to sign any other agreement on confidentiality.

A profession’s **standards**, with ethical tenets at the core, is a major component of professionalization in any field. Any erosion of essential ethical principles is thus a move toward deprofessionalization. As interpreters, we must maintain our fundamental precepts for the good of all, including our clients. AIIC does well to emphasize that anyone applying for membership makes a commitment to abide by those fundamental principles just by signing the application form. I don’t know whether interpreters in Japan are required by agencies or clients to sign a confidentiality clause or to prove they follow a code of ethics. But even without belonging to a professional association, each interpreter can abide by ethical principles, including confidentiality.

The AIIC Code of Ethics contains many elements that implicitly aim at assuring communication. Confidentiality fosters trust, so necessary to good communication. The integrity and transparency underlying the commitment not to accept work for which one is not qualified, or not to accept more than one assignment for overlapping periods of time, also engenders trustworthiness. Elements of collegiality help to weave the fabric

of team work which is so essential to our trade and has helped make interpreting a very egalitarian profession in a world where hierarchy usually reigns.

When I talk to colleagues, some tell me that among their most vivid memories are assignments in which they felt that the dream of being cultural intermediaries, real communicators, came true.

Good communication is also dependent on the qualifications of the interpreter. Hence the importance of professionalization. And it is also very much contingent upon the conditions under which competent interpreters work. This is why the AIIC Code of Ethics has a clause on working conditions, even though it does not spell them out in detail.

As intermediaries, we stand between people to connect them, not to separate them. I would like to think that we work in situations in which communication leading to greater understanding is possible, at least by the transmission of accurate, complete and un-coerced information.

Organising teams of interpreters in Asia

Some of you may know that I frequently organise teams of interpreters for meetings in Asia. I do so as Consultant Interpreter, that is to say an interpreter who puts at the disposal of a conference organiser her or his experience and knowledge as a professional interpreter and knowledge of the market **to gather together a team of interpreters for a meeting**. This is a different activity from that of interpreting and requires administrative and negotiating skills.

When clients need to find interpreters they usually turn to one of these sources:

Translation agencies: They are known as providers of translations and, as we saw earlier, many people, including conference organisers, do not know or do not make the distinction between written translation and oral translation or interpretation. So it is natural they should turn to translation agencies. These are known to work with languages and often present an image of experts, linguistic specialists.

Professional conference organisers (PCOs): They handle all aspects of the organisation of a conference and are often the sole interlocutor of a client. However,

they are not specialists in languages nor interpretation. They usually sub-contract interpretation services, sometimes through other intermediaries.

Equipment providers: They provide all the audio-visual equipment used at conferences and are known as technical experts. They may have long-term contracts with hotels or conference centers.

Conference centers and other meeting places: They often are the sole interlocutor of a client. They are in general not much interested in interpreters, as conference interpretation is not often in demand – many meetings are held on their premises without interpretation.

Consultant interpreters: They are the only intermediaries who know our profession from the inside, but they have little visibility. Most clients do not know they exist. Sometimes, consultant interpreters form groups or companies, as clients often prefer to work with a company. Some clients make this a requirement.

There are several advantages for interpreters and for our profession as a whole when AIIC Consultant Interpreters organise teams of interpreters. For instance, those consultant interpreters know AIIC interpreters and can easily find other members through the AIIC directory. They offer an AIIC quality guarantee. They frequently work on the teams they organise. They are the only ones who uphold AIIC values and principles, as well as the professional standards and working conditions. However, there are too few of them. And some find it difficult to get an appropriate remuneration for their work as consultant interpreters.

A consultant interpreter's activities include canvassing (that is, finding clients), obtaining from a client the requirements for a meeting (can be difficult), preparing cost estimates and then quotations. This can go on for a while, with changing requirements, larger or smaller teams, until a final agreement is reached. Each stage requires a new estimate and new quotation. In the meantime, you need to find the right interpreters with the appropriate language combination and, in Asia, where distances are huge, try to find those closest to the meeting venue. You need to find air flight times and airfares. Most clients, understandably, want an estimate of the likely airfares they must pay. When you have your team of interpreters, you need to confirm them and later prepare and sign contracts with them. Also, most clients want to have interpreters' CVs and getting those is usually a protracted task.

After that comes all the administrative work: Prepare a contract with the client, get approval – sometimes after several versions have been exchanged – and client signature; invoice and get payment of a down payment, which should cover at least the interpreters' airfares that you, consultant interpreter, may need to advance to the interpreters; send out individual contracts to all interpreters, get them signed and returned; get the interpreters' banking details to transfer airfare payment; arrange for hotel accommodation for interpreters; send the client all interpreters' arrival and departure information; get background documents for the meeting to send to interpreters; and so forth.

At the meeting itself, check the SI equipment and meeting room microphones, usually the night before the meeting starts. Ensure booths are properly placed; that there is safe access and emergency exit; that there is light in the booth; power outlet for laptops; water to drink; paper to write on, etc.

The practices in Asia-Pacific

I organise quite a lot of teams for Japanese PCOs and occasionally direct clients. I also organise teams for meetings in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Philippines, Bangladesh, China, Korea and other Asian countries. If I get a request for a meeting in another continent, I try to pass it on to an AIIC consultant interpreter on that continent.

Challenges to organising interpretation in Asia

One of the issues consultant interpreters face constantly in Asia is that clients want to find 'local' interpreters. That is precisely what many agencies offer on their websites and in their promotional literature. As we have seen, if we exclude Chinese, Japanese and Korean, there are only a handful of professional interpreters who work with languages generally used at international conferences and who reside in Asian countries. I need to explain and emphasize again and again that, unfortunately, for these languages there are no 'local' interpreters.

Take for instance a common language combination such as English-French-Spanish, required for a conference in Singapore. There are no 'local' interpreters for this language combination in Singapore and only two in Malaysia and Thailand combined. Clients have a hard time accepting this fact. And as a consequence, many go for the agency or convention centre that promises to provide them with 'local' interpreters.

This will cost much less, not only because the fees these agencies or intermediaries pay are usually substantially lower than what professional interpreters charge, but also because there will be no travel costs, hotel and daily subsistence costs and travel days to pay.

I explain to clients that there is a big difference between professional conference interpreters and language assistants, language aids or expatriate English teachers living in Asia, who may speak a foreign language very well and be 'local'. A perfect command of languages is only an essential prerequisite for simultaneous or consecutive interpretation at a conference. To access the profession these days, interpreters must have a university degree in conference interpreting, vast general knowledge, which can be acquired by experience or study, a quick mind, an ability to understand other people's accents and situation and the capacity to work under pressure and deliver the entire message coherently. Languages are the tools of the profession but they alone do not make a professional conference interpreter. A concert pianist must have two hands and ten fingers, but must first learn to use them to produce music and then perform with an orchestra. So too a professional interpreter learns how to use his or her linguistic skills to perfection before being able to work at an international conference. Most so-called 'locals' may have the fingers but not the skills and the practice.

In Japan

Since we are in Japan, allow me to say something about my experience with Japanese PCOs and clients. In general, Japanese PCOs have a lot of experience organising interpretation for meetings, at least Japanese-English interpretation. However, when they need other languages they usually resort to consultant interpreters and I am probably the best known to them. For me, the advantage is that I can assume from the start that they know how simultaneous interpretation works, so I need not go into long explanations. The interesting thing, though, is that I often have to explain how the other booths – apart from the Japanese – work. It is because almost all Japanese interpreters are bilingual, that is they work in Japanese and a foreign language – 90% in English. Very few have 3 or more working languages. Therefore, based on their own experience, clients and PCOs assume **all** interpreters are bilingual and always work in bilingual booths, with English being one of the languages.

As you know, most interpreters of European origin or with **European languages**, speak and use three or more languages. When I am asked to constitute a team for a meeting with, for instance, English-Japanese-French-Spanish-Russian-Chinese, I will try to find

interpreters who know and use as many of those languages as possible. I am confronted with the option of forming a team according to the UN standards, or according to Asian practice. Japanese will normally be provided by the PCO or client, so I can factor that out of my estimate. The UN system insists on interpreters for the English, French and Spanish booth to know all three languages. That means, in the English booth the two interpreters must have Spanish and French; in the French booth the two interpreters must have English and Spanish; in the Spanish booth the two interpreters must have English and French. In other words, they do not have to be bilingual and provide a 'retour' into English, as do the interpreters in the Russian, Arabic and Chinese booths; they have to be trilingual at least, but not necessarily provide a 'retour' into English.

For the Russian and Chinese booths, organisers will most often rely on bilingual interpreters who will take English in relay from the English booth when it is not spoken on the floor, that is to say when a delegate speaks French, Spanish, Arabic, etc. In the UN system bilingual booths are staffed with three interpreters, just as is the practice in Japan which, in fact, was 'copied' on the UN model by two Japanese interpreters of the late 50s who spent several weeks in Europe and New York analysing and observing how conference interpretation worked there.

In what has become known as the **Asian system of interpretation**, all booths are bilingual, with the second language being English. That makes sense, since more than 90% of Asian interpreters have English as their second language. It has the undesirable effect of not giving the 10% of Asian interpreters with a different second language much of a chance to work, except at the rare meetings where the second language is not English, but instead is maybe French, Spanish or Russian. I should add that 90% or more of Asian interpreters have only one second language: English.

An interesting result of this reality is that when a conference is held in Asian languages only, English is added as the relay language, even when no English speakers participate. I have, for instance, organised teams for meetings with Thai-Vietnamese-Chinese at which all interpreters work from their language into English and vice versa. When a Chinese delegate speaks, the Vietnamese and Thai interpreters take relay from English provided by the Chinese booth, and so on for the other languages. There are few Asian professional interpreters who work between two Asian languages or more. Similarly, there are no European interpreters who can interpret between two Asian languages. If there were, I doubt they would be trusted to be capable of such a feat.

Interestingly, when I organise a team for the language combination I mentioned before (English-Japanese-French-Spanish-Russian-Chinese), Japanese or Asian PCOs will usually ask me to provide three interpreters for the Japanese, Russian and Chinese booths, but only two interpreters for the French and Spanish booths who will be expected to also interpret back into English, because there is no English booth. All booths are expected to work from their language back into English. I argue with clients that we need three interpreters for all bilingual booths and that, if they did have an English booth, the number of interpreters for English-French-Spanish would be six in any case. In most cases, Japanese clients accept this logic, but that is not the case in other Asian countries. In fact, in Southeast Asia, the general practice is for all booths to be bilingual and have only two interpreters. It is hard to fight against that trend, because of the extra cost and because I am competing against other providers of interpretation who mostly work with non-professional interpreters and in any case pay their interpreters much less. But that is another issue.

In other Asian countries

Organising interpretation services in countries other than Japan is more difficult. Most of the clients are not familiar with interpretation and really do not understand how it works. Since English is so ubiquitous, it is assumed automatically to be the language most spoken at a conference and, as such, is not even counted as one of the conference languages. As a consultant interpreter, I constantly get requests for interpreters for, say, French and Spanish, or Thai and Vietnamese, without a mention of English. Of course, what the client wants is interpretation from English into French and Spanish, or into Thai and Vietnamese, and back into English when those languages are spoken. A client's request could go like this: *"We have a conference with about 300 delegates. There are about 10 who speak Thai and 20 Vietnamese. Can you find interpreters? And the equipment and 30 headsets?"* Only after talking or writing to such clients, sometimes more than once, do they realize that they need 300 headsets because when a Thai or Vietnamese delegate speaks, the other 270 delegates will not understand. Then I can explain that the conference languages are three (English, Thai, Vietnamese) and not two.

A challenge for most Asian languages is to find competent interpreters capable of rendering the subtleties of their native languages into English that is grammatically correct, fluent and elegant. That is an extremely difficult feat and no doubt, the reverse is equally true – translating English concepts into fluent, elegant Asian languages. All

people of different cultures and languages have their own specific way of expressing ideas, emotions, feelings – in short, specific ways of communicating.

Language and culture

This brings up the fascinating subject of languages and cultures. I recently read an article which discussed this issue and would summarize the main interesting conclusions thus:

Do English, Indonesian, Russian and Turkish speakers end up attending to, understanding, and remembering their experiences differently simply because they speak different languages?

This question touches on the major controversies in the study of mind, with important implications for politics, law and religion. Yet very little empirical work had been done on such questions until recently. The idea that language might shape thought was for a long time considered untestable at best and, more often, simply crazy and wrong. Now, a flurry of new cognitive science research is showing that in fact, **language does profoundly influence how we see the world.**

Some sharp observers of language point out that, for instance:

- Russian speakers have more words for light and dark blues and are better able to visually discriminate shades of blue.
- Some indigenous tribes say ‘north’, ‘south’, ‘east’ and ‘west’ rather than ‘above’, ‘below’, ‘left’ and ‘right’ and, as a consequence, have a great spatial orientation.
- The Piraha people of the Amazon basin eschew number words in favor of terms like ‘few’ and ‘many’ and are not able to keep track of exact quantities.
- One study found that Spanish and Japanese speakers could not remember agents of accidental events as adeptly as English speakers could. Why? Well, in Spanish and Japanese, the agent of causality is often dropped, e.g. one says “The vase broke itself” rather than “He broke the vase”.

That language embodies different ways of knowing the world seems intuitive, given the number of times we reach for a word or phrase in another language that communicates that certain *je ne sais quoi* we cannot find in our own language.

It would seem that if you change how people talk, that changes how they think. If people learn another language, they inadvertently also learn a new way of looking at the world. When bilingual people switch from one language to another, they start thinking differently, too. You too have probably observed this in your own behaviour. Certainly I have. My wife of 40 years and I usually speak English to each other, although we also have other languages in common. She tells me that when I speak Spanish or Portuguese to someone, I seem a different person. Why do we think the way we do? An important part of the answer, it turns out, is in the languages we speak.

This brings me back to the point I was making: The difficulty of conveying ideas expressed in an Asian language in a European language (or another language in general) and vice versa.

When there is need to find Vietnamese, Thai, Indonesian, Malay, Hindi or other interpreters, I am confronted with more difficulty than finding Japanese, Chinese or Korean interpreters. There has been a longer tradition of simultaneous interpretation between the latter three languages and English, as well as other languages, than is the case for the Southeast Asian languages. Schools and universities in Japan, China and Korea have been running interpretation courses for several decades now. Such schools or other opportunities for a professional training as interpreter do not yet exist for Southeast Asian languages or are just beginning in some cases.

Interestingly, the government of France sponsored interpretation courses at universities in Thailand and Malaysia in the 1960s and 70s and some AIC interpreters were there as lecturers for a while. The courses were abandoned after only a few years because the level of English or other foreign language of the students was simply insufficient. Sadly that is still the case with the courses run by universities in Malaysia and Thailand, as I can attest having been invited to speak to students there more than once. I mentioned one case in my preliminary remarks. While almost all university students in those countries study English at some time during their school years, very few attain a level of comfortable fluency. As you may have observed, the level of English spoken throughout Asia is very low, but people understand in general and, for most, that is enough.

There are a handful of interpreters for Thai, Vietnamese, Malay, Indonesian, Lao, Khmer, Nepali and Farsi; more for Hindi which is used at conferences in India. With a few odd exceptions, these are not people who graduated from a university-level interpretation course. They are self taught. In the case of Vietnamese, some have had

ad-hoc training of six months or more at the EU in Brussels. Most of them do a pretty credible job interpreting from English into their mother tongue; but very few can provide a good, accurate and fluent interpretation into English. These are the best with whom we get to work occasionally. But there are many less professional interpreters – I hesitate to use that word – for these languages who translate at sales, business and other meetings. They do the best they can, but it cannot be called proper simultaneous interpretation. On a couple of occasions during a coffee break at a meeting with Asian languages for which I have organised interpretation, a delegate has told me: *“You interpreters are really good. I can understand everything. Not like at such or such a sales meeting, where we only could catch a few sentences now and then.”*

Far be it from me to criticize other interpreters. I just want to recognize the difficulty of our task and the fact that for many Asian languages there are no good training possibilities. Apart from the fact that the level of English or other foreign language of those who want to interpret needs to be outstanding, compared to what one normally finds in Asia.

Languages in demand

According to my own observation of market trends, I would say in Asia the most frequently demanded language combinations are the following, in that order:

English-Chinese; English-Japanese; English-Korean; English-French; English-Spanish; English-Russian; English-Arabic; English-Vietnamese; English-German; English-Thai; English-Hindi; English-Indonesian; English-Malay. Languages such as Khmer, Lao, Urdu, Tagalog are used for interpretation mainly in courts, but rarely at conferences.

The implications are, first, that it is almost impossible to find any chance of training for interpretation in the lesser used languages and, second, that those who do use them to interpret very rarely get a chance to practice interpretation. This in turn means they don't get a chance to improve and they cannot make a living out of interpretation. They must have some other occupation which in turn makes it more problematic to take up interpretation assignments.

Fortunately, that is not the situation for Japanese, nor Chinese or Korean. In fact, for those languages there are not only plenty of work opportunities which allow for constant improvement, but also there are university courses in interpretation. And, of course, there are academic associations, such as the Japan Association for Interpreting and

Translation Studies, which promote further enrichment and deepening of cultural understanding.

It has been a privilege for me to share a few ideas with you, my colleagues, and I will be happy to discuss your reactions and questions.

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About the author

Jean-Pierre ALLAIN is a conference interpreter and an economist. He has been working as conference interpreter since 1971 for the United Nations institutions, European Union, business and professional associations in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Americas. He has been living and working in Asia since 1984 (Malaysia 1984-1999; Thailand and Malaysia 1999-2010). He has a long experience as conference organizer and language services provider for conferences since 1973. He also worked as economist and advisor to NGOs in Asia, Africa and Europe.