Workshop Team Interpreting

July 28th ’00, Amsterdam

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NEDERLANDSE BEROEPSVERENIGING TOLKEN GEBARENTAAL NBTG

ISBN 90-804783-7-7

Fourth print - October 2006

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Preface

On July 28th '00 the Dutch Association of Sign Language Interpreters (NBTG) hosted the workshop Team Interpreting, which was presented by Laurie Swabey.

Students and Sign Language Interpreters from the Netherlands and other European countries participated in the workshop. The participants found the workshop interesting, enriching, and inspiring.

This is a report of the workshop as it was held on July 28th ’00. The report will be a helpful resource for the participants of the workshop. This report does not intend to be a how-to-guide on team interpreting.

The NBTG hopes that the report will stimulate and inspire interpreters to reach further professionalism in team interpreting.

About the presenter

Laurie Swabey is the Associate Professor and Director of the Bachelor’s Degree in Interpreting Program at the College of St. Catherine (CSC). Before that, she worked at the University of Minnesota for five years teaching and writing curriculum for their spoken language community interpreting program.

From 1980 - 1990 Laurie Swabey was Assistant Professor/Director of the interpreting program at the University of New Hampshire. She has been on the national Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT) Board and has presented at the national CIT and RID conferences.

Recently, Laurie Swabey received an $800,000 grant from the US Dept. of Education to be one of the ten Federally funded centers for Interpreter Education in the US.

Introduction

Interpreters work in isolation, we are the only person who know if we are doing a good job. For many years people thought that if you could go in all day and interpret you were an excellent interpreter. But interpreting is a difficult and tiring task: research has shown that twenty minutes is really the maximum if the interpreter wants to give a quality interpretation.

What is Team Interpreting?

In the team of interpreters there is one interpreter who is the target interpreter. This is the interpreters that is on. The other interpreter is the feed. This interpreter feeds information to the target interpreters.

It is important that the team negotiates for breaks so the team has a real break. One interpreter should not be left alone during the interpretation, because the other interpreter is having a break. Or you could try to get two sets of team interpreters, that is, four interpreters altogether. One team can then have a break while the other team is interpreting.

A team can also consist of three people, with two working as either the feed or the target interpreter while the third team member rests. The length and the complexity of the content will influence these choices. Example: a 5-day conference compared to an all day hearing.

Many interpreters find it more tiring to provide the feed on a signed message coming in (voicing). This requires a tremendous amount of concentration. Again, it is important to have breaks because both the target and the feed interpreter are focused on the interpretation.

Definition of Team Interpreting

A team can be more than two interpreters. The process of teaming involves two interpreters with complementary abilities who are:

- **Working toward evolving a converged style**
  Finding the same communication method, so it will not be contrasting for the Deaf people. For a new interpreter this will be harder because you just want "to get the message out" and because you have a more limited range of style and register.

- **Developing a symbiotic dynamic of trust and reprocity**
  It goes both ways, trust each other. You have the same goal of giving a good interpretation.

- **Sharing responsibility for the entire interpretation**
  We started team interpreting for physical reasons. The feed interpreter often left the room or did something unrelated to the interpreting task. This caused and sometimes still causes anger by the people who hire you, because they have to pay two interpreters instead of one. In the model we are discussing today, both interpreters are involved in the interpreting task, providing a more coherent interpretation.

Types of teams

1. Two like interpreters working as a team both qualified to do the job This does not mean that you have to have the same skills, but you can also have complimentary skills.

2. Dual services
This means a team of interpreters and a team of transliterators

3. Relay interpreting
The hearing interpreter is feeding the deaf person, who is also acting as an interpreter. It is important that both the deaf and the hearing (feed) interpreters are trained in Relay Interpreting.

4. Sign Language interpreters and spoken language interpreters

5. Situational learning team
This means a skilled, experienced interpreter working with a very new interpreter or a student. The more experienced interpreter provides leadership and support. This should be arranged in advance for a situation that does NOT require 2 highly skilled interpreters.

Interpreters are burned out quickly because deaf people need interpreters. On the other hand you need to take care of yourself.

Factors indicating the need for a team

- Complexity of content
- Technical content
- High stress situation (change or life event)
- High stress situation
- Unique communication needs
- Foreign language
- Length of assignment
- Accuracy
- Process diagnostics/feedback
- Visibility/size of space
- Multiple participants with varying needs
- Asking for repetition is very professional. As an interpreter, you will miss information or need clarification. What is important is that you have good strategies for asking for repetition and/or clarification.

It helps to talk to someone about the situation:
- It is stressful emotionally if we don't talk about it
- With a team you can talk about it
- Talk that is problem solving, will help us move forward. We learn and grow as a profession by sharing information in an appropriate manner. (Remember to respect confidentiality. Talk about an assignment should be focused on the interpretation, not on the deaf or hearing participants.)
- Any assignment over two hours must have a team
- Certification for interpreters is important, it is good for the profession
- It is not the job of the deaf person you are interpreting for to evaluate your skills all the time and give you feedback.

Skills of an interpreter

- Negotiation skills
- Communication skills
- Professionalism (present yourself as a person that is knowledgeable about the ethics and the language)
- We focus a lot on language and interpreting skills, but you need to be assertive and professional as well
- Good spoken language
- Vocabulary
- Register (high and low)
- Intonation
- Affect
- Pronunciation
- Grammar and syntax
- Interruption techniques/the ability to "get the floor" appropriately, both when you, as the interpreter, need clarification and when the deaf person wants to speak
- Cultural knowledge: knowing how culture affects language and interaction
- Sign Language
- Vocabulary, register, affect, sign articulation, grammar, syntax
- Discourse markers (openings, closings, transitions, asides)
- Correction techniques - knowing when and how to correct something (Example: a slip of the tongue compared to a serious content error)
- Comprehension
- Production
- Fingerspelling and numbers
- Classifiers
- Idiomatic language or metaphors
- Important to know your own strengths and weaknesses.

Information

Before you start interpreting, give your team member some clues as to what information you want the other interpreter potentially help you with (Examples: fingerspelling comprehen-sion, dates, technical terms). If you want feedback from your partner on your interpretation, it is better to ask beforehand if she would give you some feedback on your skills after the assignment. Ask: "How can I improve?" Or, "I've been working on my fingerspelling. Can you tell me if it is clear and readable?" Bring paper and pen and write down some specific examples.

Do NOT evaluate or comment on everything, but try to narrow it down to a few reoccurring patterns. It you can honestly find some specific, positive parts of the interpretation to discuss, that will help the interpreter further identify her strengths.

Processing style

Every interpreter has a different degree of comfort with lag time (the time between receiving the message and putting the target language out). Lag time (which is also called processing time) can range from 2 to 8 seconds, depending on the interpreter's style and the content of the topic.

If your interpretation is off, it is interesting to look at your lag time. Some interpreters find their interpreta-tions improve when they allow themselves more lag time, or more time to process and really understand the meaning of the message. With team interpreting, it is extremely important for the feed interpreter to respect the target interpreter's lag/processing time.

If you have a long lag time you can tell your team: "I have a long lag time so please don't feed me unless I tell you." Conversely, if you tend to panic after missing a fingerspelled word, tell this to your team-mate so she can react accordingly.

First you have to evaluate yourself before you work as a team. It is vital that you know your own style and preferences as well as your own strengths and weaknesses. The team has to discuss many things beforehand in order to work together effectively. From this, interpreters will find their own abilities improve, as well as their ability to work as a team.

Preparation

Feed interpreter:
Examples: The feed interpreter can make a seating chart of all the people in the room. He or she can also assist the on interpreter if something is pointed at by the speaker as "this or that" on a black board. The feed interpreter should also have any handouts or copies of speeches or documents in front of her.

Sharing info between team members about the assignment:
- Group dynamics
- Participants communication styles
- The setting

Logistics
(where to sit: in front, off to the side; are microphones needed; background, lighting, media that will be used by presenters)
- Content, terminology
- Ethical considerations
- Informing consumers about the use of the team approach
- Your comfort factor with the content and participants
- Establishing signals, timing, switching, (note taking also during switching!)
- Switch every 15-20 minutes or when the speaker or topic changes
- Signals: lean, tap, eye gaze, (when and how much feed you want/need)

Other considerations
- Be specific: when and how you need information from the feed interpreter
- Works better: while voicing, for the feed interpreter not to talk right into the ear but at slightly to the side and back of the head (bone)
- Cover your microphone or put it down so the audience can not hear the feed's comments.

Problem situations
- Discuss beforehand strategies for what to do if you miss something completely.
- Most interpreters get more than they think, stress makes it worse. The info is harder to get out. Often a good strategy is for the feed to give the interpreter a key word or sentence and provide support (NOT showing the attitude of "I can't believe you didn't get it.) If the on interpreter is not getting it, should the feed interpreter take over? Taking over the microphone may seem like a good solution for the moment, but perhaps not for the rest of the interpretation. It can change the power dynamic and create tension. What if the feed interpreter corrects the target interpreter but the target interpreter doesn't feel an error has been made? In the majority of cases, only the interpreter who is on should stop the speaker
- If an important error is made, the interpreting team needs to report the error, not the single interpreter. If an error isn't crucial to the meaning of the message, let it go.
- Be specific to the referral agency that you need two interpreters for the assignment. Doing the assignment well the first time saves time and money. Having two interpreters also reduces the physical stress on the interpreter which means fewer interpreters will need medical leave for injuries.
- In the past the interpreters in Washington state convinced the court it is better to have two interpreters. Research showed that during one interpreting assignment in court 72 more questions had to be asked because of 1 misinterpretation.

When you miss information consider
- Taking a deep breath
- Stopping the speaker
- A big lean over to the feed: give everything you got
- Focusing on what you know about the topic; keeping the big picture in mind as you formulate your next sentence
- Concentrating on the message, not on whether you are a "good" or "bad" interpreter
- It can feel risky to work with a teammate because she can see all of your strengths and weaknesses. A good team member is not judgmental but works to support her teammate in a positive way.

What to feed
(tell your teammate what you find most helpful).
This could be a:
- Keyword
- Phrase: word not enough
- The whole thing
- Don't over feed: a whole sentence instead of a fingerspelled word.
- Generally: the less info the less stressful

Interpreting is not a science, it is an art. Seleskovitch has compared interpreting to a painting, not a photograph. Although we need to be accurate, interpretations are not 'perfect'.

Developing a team approach

What works?
- Meeting with the other interpreter in advance
- Being supportive (non verbally as well as verbally)
- Establishing signals/methods for feedback
- Having a balanced team
- Matching feedback to processing level, respect the work of your partner

What does not work?
- Showing off by helping
- Making assumptions about what the other interpreter wants
- Too much feed
- Taking control of the situation

Feedback (optional)
- On the feed
- On the target interpretation
- Separate the feedback on the feed and on the target interpreter.

In your feedback try to be:
- Specific
- Objective
- Sensitive
- Balanced
- Supportive
- Word your feedback messages: say “I saw...” instead of “you did...”

Diagnostic feedback
- Focus on the process instead of the product
- Looks at why miscues are made
- Emphasis is on patterns, not miscues, that occur only once or twice
- Helps interpreters to understand how they process information and how this affects their interpretations

Potential difficulties
- An other interpreter in the audience “calls out” words or show signs
- Deaf person prefers one interpreter on the team
- One interpreter takes control
- One interpreter, is prepared and one is not
- You are having a difficult time and don’t feel you are interpreting as accurately as you usually do. How can that be handled without making excuses?
- “I am having an off day, maybe we can work together in the future again”

The following article was published in the Interpres,
the quarterly newsletter of the NBTG, in September 1998.

Team Interpreting

by Laurie Swabey

Team interpreting has been used successfully in the United States since the early 1990s and can be viewed as one more step in the evolution of the interpreting profession. Team interpreting, as discussed in this article, refers to the fact that two interpreters have accepted full responsibility for the entire interpreted discourse. Under this model, both interpreters are "on" during the entire assignment. Even though only one interpreter is actually producing the message, the other interpreter is engaged in the task at hand. This is in contrast to tag-team interpreting, in which 2 interpreters switch every 20 minutes. The "off" interpreter is not considered responsible for the interpretation during her down time. In fact, the "off" interpreter can often be seen making phone calls, making notes in her calendar or catching up on the latest news. This article will look at team interpreting as a joint effort between two colleagues. This way of approaching and guiding our work as interpreters has the potential to benefit both interpreters and consumers.

Background

In the past, when two interpreters have worked together, it has been mainly for mental and physical relief from the task of interpreting. This trend away from tag team interpreting, makes sense when viewed as part of our professional evolution. In the early years of the profession, during the 60s and 70s it was mistakenly believed that a good interpreter could "do it all". "Good" interpreters were expected to be able to interpret anything cold, without any preparation. Furthermore, most consumers were happy to have one interpreter, and requesting (or paying) two interpreters was not considered feasible. Interpreters routinely did half day and all day assignments alone. It was only in the late 70s that as a profession we began to more fully understand the mental and physical demands of interpreting. The standard protocol was that two interpreters should be hired and that they would switch with each other every 20 to 30 minutes. The focus was on logistics - interpreters were considered prepared if they discussed exactly how often they would switch and how they would switch. During his or her "off" time, the interpreter was free to do as s/he pleased - whether reading a book or making phone calls. It was not uncommon to see the "off" interpreter reading a novel during this time.

However, in the 1980s, the profession began to see interpreting through a different lens. As interpreters began looking at their work in the bilingual-bicultural context, a new approach to working together also began to emerge. As interpreters were able to put their work in the context of a cultural, linguistic framework, many of the misconceptions that had been prevalent in the previous decade were put to rest. Interpreters were able to let go of words and interpret meaning. Interpreters realized the benefits of preparation and negotiation. After years of working in isolation, interpreters began to talk more openly about their work, particularly the interpreting process.

Within this context, interpreters began to take more and more responsibility for their work. Interpreters were not machines relaying messages but they were an integral part of the interaction and as such, they needed to take full responsibility for the transmission of linguistic and cultural information.

Interpreting doesn't happen in a vacuum, interpreters make many choices during the course of an assignment and interpreters

needs to be able to analyze and monitor their execution of the interpreting task. As interpreters became more responsible for their work and more skilled at negotiating assignments, the traditional model of tag team interpreting became less widely used.

Team Interpreting Defined

The process of teaming involves two interpreters with complementary abilities who are: 1) working toward evolving a converged style 2) developing a symbiotic dynamic of trust and reciprocity 3) sharing responsibility for the entire interpretation

Situations Appropriate for Teaming

A team of interpreters is generally required when an interpreting assignment consists of more than two hours of continuous interpreting. Other than length of assignment, some other factors that point to this type of teaming include: complexity of content, high risk situations, high stress situations, unique communication needs, situations where accuracy is of the utmost importance and situations where interrupting the speaker may be impossible or inappropriate.

Preparation for Team Interpreting

As with any interpreting assignment, preparation is always a consideration. With a team interpreted situation, it is important for the interpreters to agree upon who will get information about the topic and content (including any handouts). It is equally important to discuss how and when this information will be shared with the other interpreter.

Both interpreters should be fully prepared for the assignment. When going into a team situation, each interpreter needs to be fully aware and honest about his/her strengths and weaknesses. One of the benefits of a team is that together, the two interpreters can capitalize on their strengths and minimize their weaknesses.

To have a balanced team, the individual interpreters often bring different strengths. In fact, a team in which the interpreters complement each other is probably ideal. As you begin to forge a way of working together, it is helpful to share information about your background - how and when you learned ASL, where you learned to interpret; your range of register and style, how you do your best work; what types of situations are you most comfortable with and what situations make you least comfortable.

In addition, both individuals must be able to communicate with each other effectively about a variety of other issues including; knowledge and comfort with the topic, how they process incoming information and how they would like information fed. Considerations for sign to voice and voice to sign will need to be addressed. One very practical function of the feed interpreter is to be a constant monitor of the visual environment. Although the interpreter can hear what is going on, she may not be able to see everything that is happening in the room. The feed interpreter can use handouts from the presenter as necessary to provide a specific spelling of a name or other information. The feed interpreter should also have a note pad and pen handy. This is useful in communicating with your partner in a non-distracting way about some aspect of the interpretation or the situation.

When the interpreters switch in a voice to sign situation, the person taking on the role of the "feed" interpreter can read any notes jotted down by his or her partner. An interpreter may also want to jot down a note related to the interpretation that would be appropriate to discuss at another time. Notetaking, when used professionally, can be an asset to both interpreters. It is a common tool used by spoken language interpreters. Both interpreters need to discuss how the feed will be accomplished. This involves the positioning of the interpreters, the volume of the voice or the size of the signs, and how the feed interpreter will know that his/her input is necessary. When voicing, interpreter often sit side by side, very close together. Sometimes one interpreter is slightly more forward than the other. The timing of the feed is a particularly critical issue. It is important to discuss how much information you want fed, when you want it fed and how you want it communicated. It is very distracting to have the "feed" interpreter constantly jumping in to help

without regard for the "on" interpreter's style. By discussing their processing styles and comfort zones, interpreters are better able to predict and accommodate their partners needs.

Some teams who work together well and have done many assignments seem to instincti-vely know when their partner needs a feed. However, when developing a teaming relation-ship, this should not be immediately assumed. Discuss whether or not the on interpreter will give the feed interpreter a signal, and if so, what it will be. Common signals include leaning closer to the feed interpreter or tapping them on the leg. (for voicing)

What information will be fed is also an important topic to discuss. Some interpreters prefer to be fed just a brief word or phrase. The other interpreter can then decide how to best incorporate that information. Other interpreters prefer to be fed a complete sentence that they can then incorporate. The "feed" interpreter should give this kind of support in a whisper. Always keep in mind that interpreters vary greatly in their processing time. Respect the work of your partner by giving feeds that are congruent with their approach to processing. Jumping in too early only serves as a distraction to the interpreter.

An Example of a Successful Team Experience
The example below from my own personal experience will highlight some of the considerations for team interpreting. One of my best team interpreting jobs happened at a large conference. One of the presentations I was scheduled to interpret was a college instructor describing a particular teaching methodology. I was teaming with an interpreter who was well known for his high degree of competence. It also happened that he had Deaf parents and his fluency with ASL was far superior to mine. Under the old model of team interpreting, we would have split the job into 20 minutes segments and not worked together. However, by using this model of team interpreting, the final product was probably better than if either of us had done it alone.

Although this interpreter brought tremen-dous ASL competency to the job, he was quick to point out one of my strengths which was familiarity and comfort with the register of the talk as well as the academic background of the speaker. Even though my comprehension of the ASL presenter was weaker than my teammate's, my ability to work in the register and my knowledge of the topic were a significant strength. We decided that I would be the "on" interpreter and that he would be the "feed" interpreter. Although on first thought it may seem that it would make sense to have the stronger ASL user voicing, on second glance it made more sense for me to voice because I had a better command of the target language in this situation. Also, I would not have been very adept at feeding him concepts he missed, but he was quite able to give me any ideas or concepts that I missed.

Another very positive part of this particular interpretation was the way in which we worked. I had the microphone but he sat very close to me and followed both the presenter and my interpretation with great concentration. He would nod often as a way of supporting my interpretation as well as occasionally making supportive comments in a whisper. This type of feedback was very motivating and allowed me to maintain a very high level of concentration on the task at home. I could focus and concentrate much better on the target production because I knew if I missed any of the concepts, he would be right there to fill me in. He did feed me information a couple of times and he provided the information in a way that was not superior or judgmental. He gave me the concepts and let me integrate them into the interpretation. In all, because of both of our strengths and our ability to work together, it was an excellent interpretation.

What Makes Teaming Work?
The above example illustrates some of the components necessary for a successful team. It can't be emphasized enough that teaming is a partnership; that it depends on mutual trust and respect. There is no room for over-inflated egos in this type of approach. Each team member must know their strengths and weaknesses and be able to work to emphasize their strengths.

In addition, both individuals must be able to communicate with each other effectively about a variety of other issues including; knowledge and comfort with the topic, how they process incoming information and how they would like information fed.

In Summary, Some Dos and Dont's

Do:

- Know your strengths and weaknesses. Discuss how each interpreter complements the other and how as a team you can capitalize on both partners strengths.
- Be a clear communicator when preparing with your teammate - be precise in communicating your style and needs
- Work with someone you respect and trust
- Take responsibility for the full interpretation, not just the time you are interpreting
- Discuss your knowledge of the topic and content, your comfort factor with the job
- Discuss your processing style and how you manage incoming information as well as signals, timing and switching
- Show your support for the other interpreter by your body language (nodding, posture, facial expression) and your attitude
- Discuss the speaker's goal and remember that not all information is equally crucial. Although our goal is a complete and accurate interpretation, focusing on each lexical item usually takes away from the interpretation. Do keep the big picture in mind!
- Constantly monitor the visual environment when you are the feed interpreter - collect handouts, note seating arrangements, be prepared to feed information from a handout or chart if it is not visible to your partner or he or she needs a particular spelling or visual cues as to how a graph or chart is set up.
- Inform consumers about how you are working together if they are not familiar with this style of working.

Don't:

- Make assumptions about what your teammate wants
- Blame or make excuses
- Criticize or show that you are dissatisfied with the other interpreter, either through words or body language (shaking your head, rolling your eyes, grimacing)
- Use teaming as a way to show you know more

Developing a Team Approach

Developing an effective team approach does not happen instantly. In order to develop a successful team, both interpreters have to have a certain level of trust and respect for each other. They also must be able to discuss their own style and background as well as their range of skills. Teaming requires the ability to be open about one's interpreting skills and to be able to negotiate a mutually acceptable way of working together. This kind of work also involves some risk. Some interpreters feel "safer" when they working by themselves and have no other interpreter around to "judge" their work. However, when working with a teammate, you can learn from the process as well as from the colleague with whom you are working. Effective teaming doesn't happen instantaneously. Each team of interpreters needs to work out the best way for them to work together in order to produce the most accurate and appropriate interpretation possible. With some interpreters you may want to decide on very specific guidelines for operating as a team. With other colleagues you may find that your styles merge symbiotically and that the match not only creates an excellent interpretation but leads to interesting discussions afterwards about issues related to the interpreting process.

By working cooperatively together, by pooling our resources and our strengths, our interpretations become more full and complete. This benefits not only the consumers and the interpreters but ultimately the profession.