

## **The Art of Interpreting**

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I have been asked to talk to you today about what it takes to become an interpreter. When Brian first asked me what I wanted to call my talk, I told him I was trying to decide between two titles: 'I couldn't interpret either' or 'Only connect'. And if I still haven't really decided, it is because I think that both these themes are important in what I want to say to you, so rather than abandon one or the other I've tried to find a way to link them together.

I'm going to start off with the first theme, 'I couldn't interpret, either', because I think it's important to remember that almost everyone who has achieved something that you are hoping to do in life also started from the position of not being able to do it – and that as Einstein allegedly once said, genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. You will have to work at it, of course, but if you are sufficiently determined to do it, you can. It's not a superhuman skill.

So although I would now consider myself to be a reasonably well-experienced and competent interpreter, capable both of consecutive and – if you really twist my arm – simultaneous interpreting, I want to remind you that there was of course a time when I could do neither of these things, and looked on with awe at people who could. However, I was lucky enough to receive my basic training as an interpreter at Simul Academy in Tokyo, and I still remember the title of a book written by the head of Simul International, Masumi Muramatsu, probably the most famous simultaneous interpreter of his generation in Japan, which he had called 'I couldn't speak English either'. This was an account of his early days learning to be an interpreter in post-war Japan, along with a large number of anecdotes and tips that were both informative and amusing. But the most encouraging thing about the book to me was the fact that he was prepared to admit that, despite his almost god-like status, there was once a time when he too had not been able to speak English. I found that very comforting, and adopted it as a kind of motto, an inspiration for my own efforts to master Japanese.

In my particular case, I didn't even start thinking about wanting to be an interpreter until I was nearly thirty years old – and in fact I did not even speak a word of Japanese until I was in my mid-twenties. I won't bore you with the reasons why at this point, but it may perhaps also encourage you to know that you don't necessarily have to learn a language at an early age to be any good at speaking it – although merely being able to speak a language, of course, does not necessarily mean that you are going to be a good interpreter. As far as language learning itself is concerned, it is obviously easier to start younger, and to develop a consistently authentic accent you probably have to have had significant exposure before you reach your teenage years, but that is not itself a precondition of being a good interpreter, nor does it guarantee that you will be any good at it. You have to be fluent, of course; but there are other qualities, or attributes, that are much more important, and I would now like to turn to these.

What makes a good interpreter? There are some obvious things, like the ability to concentrate and remember fine detail, but in my experience these skills are really more like side-effects, the positive results that come with the right attitude of mind. It may perhaps surprise you to hear me say this, but I think that the first and most important quality for a would-be interpreter is a well-developed sense of curiosity and broad interest in what goes on in the world. One test of whether or not you have this quality is to ask yourself if you are the sort of person who gets side-tracked when reading an encyclopaedia, ending up reading something quite different to what you started out looking for, or whether you find yourself spending hours flitting from site to site on the internet, for example. I'm not necessarily recommending this as a good use of time; but it is a useful way of telling whether you might be the sort of person who likes to acquire knowledge for its own sake, regardless of whether it is going to be immediately useful.

The reason why it is so important to have a wide general knowledge of the world to be a really good and effective interpreter is because interpreting is not simply a question of linguistics, of mechanically converting a speaker's words into another language. You have to be able to understand, both quickly and intuitively, what a speaker is talking about – otherwise not only will you have difficulty following what he or she is saying, you will not be very convincing to your listeners. There is another

important reason as well. If you have a good understanding of what a speaker is talking about, you don't have to concentrate so hard on the actual flow of words – especially on trying to remember the words – and the brain space this frees up can allow you to give a better interpretation. This is particularly true for simultaneous interpreting, where at times you actually have to be ahead of the speaker in terms of knowing where a particular sentence is going in order to keep up to speed.

You may perhaps be thinking that if you specialise in a particular area, you won't need to develop a wide interest in other things, but there are several reasons why this is not necessarily true. First of all, even speakers who are supposed to be talking about a particular speciality will often make wider references to topical events and subjects that they suppose the audience may have an interest in, either as part of a formal talk or simply in the course of casual conversation, and you can't just say 'sorry, I don't know about that'. Secondly – and especially as a free-lance interpreter – you do not always get, nor can afford to wait for, jobs that are in your subject speciality. If you have a broad base of knowledge, you can be more confident about taking on areas that you might not otherwise consider. Most of what most speakers have to say about any topic can in fact be summarised in a few key points, and once you have grasped what those are, and know how to say them in both languages, life becomes much easier. Thirdly, a sense of curiosity will definitely help you when it comes to those assignments that you might not necessarily consider very interesting – because almost everything is interesting if you can only learn to look at it from the right point of view.

So to start off with, it helps to have a curious mind. The second attribute that I think it is important for an interpreter to have – and this may again surprise you – is a degree of acting ability. There are several ways in which the jobs of actors and interpreters are similar, the most obvious being that neither of them speak their own lines. Whether actor or interpreter, you are conveying someone else's ideas, and the more convincingly you can do it, the better you will be at your job. After all, you are literally the mouthpiece of the person you are interpreting for, and in order to speak for them you have to in some sense almost become them temporarily – even if you don't like or agree with what they are saying. I'm not suggesting that you get carried away, and give wildly emotional performances – merely that you approach your job

with something of the spirit of a method actor, who tries to get into the mind of his or her character as much as possible. This means being able to identify with what the speaker is saying, and try as much as possible to reproduce not only what they are saying, but the way in which they say it. There's no need to try to mimic every habit and mannerism – but when someone is speaking there is a whole band of communication that is happening outside of the words themselves that you need to be able to pick up on and convey if you are going to do your job properly.

First of all, and closest to actual the words themselves, is the question of the kind of language is the speaker using. Is it polite? Formal? Relaxed? Witty? Idiosyncratic? This gives you the first important clue as to the type of person they are, and the sort of person you should 'be' when you are interpreting for them. Interpreting is not an exact science; but whilst there is no 'right' way of interpreting any particular utterance, it will help you psychologically to come up with the right choice of word or phrase if you are 'in tune' with the person you are interpreting for. But beyond the words there is the whole question of the speaker's emotional tone. Printed words on the page can be difficult to gauge, but when you have a live speaker in front of you it is very much easier to tell what sort of attitude they have their subject. Are they calm and professional? Tired and emotional? Bored? Angry? Irritated? All these things come across as a kind of carrier wave for the words themselves, and add a whole shade of colouring that in some cases is as important as the words themselves. If you do not read this, and fail to convey the emotions that the speaker is communicating, then not only are you only doing half a job – not to mention being unfair to the speaker – you also risk creating a misunderstanding. This is particularly true when working with languages such as English and Japanese, where there can be powerful stereotypes and prejudices in the people's minds which can be triggered by poor interpreting. You have to be sensitive, too, to the way in which moods are conveyed in different cultures. You have to be aware of the emotional spectrum of a language and culture and how a particular statement works within it – and be able to reproduce that so that it has the same effect in the target language. All of this, to my mind, is an extension of the acting ability that I was talking about.

To give you an example of the kind of thing I mean, some years ago I was asked by the programme Newsnight to interpret for an interview with Prime Minister Kaifu who

was on a state visit to the UK. In the end the Japanese Embassy refused to allow anyone other than the official interpreter to speak for him, but out of curiosity I watched the programme anyway. The interviewer, Jeremy Paxman, asked the Prime Minister in his usual forthright way about the Japanese attitude to whaling. Kaifu-san, to his credit, tried to defuse the tension by speaking quite openly and informally. The tone he was taking was more or less along the lines of "Well you see, Jeremy, the problem is that in Japan it's part of our culture. You mustn't forget that we have to consider.....etc" When the official interpreter started in however, the tone was quite different. "It is the official policy of the Government of Japan that these matters should be subject to due consideration...etc etc". Whilst the interpreter probably thought that this formal tone was more appropriate for a Prime Minister, it actually created the impression in a British audience that he was avoiding the question. I couldn't help wondering how many good intentions at international conferences have foundered on the wrong impression being created by an unfortunate, if often unintentional misuse of words by an interpreter.

I have identified two attributes that I believe will help make you a good interpreter – a curious mind and certain degree of acting ability. These are qualities that, to some extent, you either do or do not have – but even so, they can be worked on and developed. You can and should work to increase your general knowledge about the world, particularly those areas you feel weakest in. Probably the best way you can develop this is to read a broadsheet newspaper every day, and not just the articles you are interested in. You should aim to have a basic grasp of almost all the topics that are current at any given time. I would particularly suggest that you keep up to speed with scientific and economic topics, since if you are going to make a living out of being an interpreter, these are the two areas where you are most likely to find work. It might be nice to imagine that you can find enough work in literary and artistic fields, but in the real world this is not very likely.

You should try to keep up with science in particular, especially since the majority of people who have chosen to study languages do not usually have a background in science, which is a real weakness when it comes to doing any technical interpreting. I'm not saying that you have to bury yourself in science textbooks, but there are many so-called popular science books available now which explain the basic

principles of topics such as genetic engineering clearly and relatively simply. Read newspapers, read books, and do so in both languages. Regularly watch topical TV programmes such as Newsnight and Question Time, so that you know what opinion leaders are talking about. It may sound like a daunting prospect, but you need to have as broad a knowledge as possible of basic principles, the main topics, the ideas that are in the air. This is particularly so if you are interested in getting work for news organisations, or in the media.

Acting ability is harder to assess, and perhaps less easy to work on, but at the very least you should try to find opportunities to practice speaking in public, projecting your voice, and to develop your ability to express a wider emotional vocabulary. Anything where you have to work with people and communicate in front of an audience is useful – you have to overcome the natural human reluctance to speak in public. This is particularly important since the authority with which you speak will affect the perception of the speaker you are interpreting for. If you project a sense of relaxed confidence, and speak clearly in a firm voice, it will be much easier for people to concentrate on what is being said, and they will trust you. If, on the other hand, you are obviously nervous, speak in a small, flat voice and avoid eye contact, no matter how good your interpreting, the audience will wonder if they can trust you. This question of confidence is absolutely crucial, and is a key quality in a good interpreter. I remember listening to a speech given by one of Muramatsu-san's contemporaries in which he described an incident where he was taken aside by an American officer at GHQ in Tokyo, where he was working, and told that, although they knew that he was not a very good interpreter, they were going to continue to use him because he had 'the knack of plausibility'. In other words, he was convincing as an interpreter, and they judged that this quality was almost more important than being accurate.

If you can combine the two qualities I have been talking about, you will find that it will definitely help you when you find yourself – as sooner or later you certainly will – in one of those situations where you don't understand what has just been said and yet you have to say something anyway. If you have been following what is being said in general, and understand the direction the speaker is going in, your general knowledge and intelligence should allow you to be able to silently 'fill in' the missing

piece of the puzzle, rather like a computer programme can enhance a damaged file or image. You may ultimately be wrong, but nine times out of ten you are likely to be right. The trick, then, is not to give away the fact that you are not sure. As Bruce Holcombe, my inspiring Australian teacher at Simul used to say: “If you are going to make a mistake, go for it!”.

I'd like to turn now to a couple of other issues that I think are of relevance to anyone wanting to study interpreting. First of all, an interpreting course is not – or should not be – about learning language as such. If you are interested in being an interpreter, then obviously you must already be fluent in the languages you are working with. Fluency, though, is not the same thing as having a wide vocabulary. What I mean by fluency is the ability to speak a language without having to stop and translate things in your head. There may be words and expressions that you do not know – there always will be, in both languages – but you must feel comfortable with the basic grammar and, more importantly, the feeling, the rhythms and the natural music of a language before you should even think about being an interpreter. You will of course learn many new words and phrases in the course of your study, but if you are not fluent – if you do not feel at ease expressing yourself in the target language, you need to work at it until you do. Usually this will mean a period of time living – and preferably working – either in a country or an environment where only that language is spoken.

Assuming then that you are fluent, the next step is to throw away your dictionary. This may seem a rather radical suggestion, and I mean it more as a symbolic than a really practical step, but until you learn to avoid leaning on your dictionary, you will never develop the mental skills that you require to be a good interpreter. This is particularly so if you have acquired much of your knowledge of the target language from schoolwork and language books, as these are sadly not the best guides to the way that people actually speak. The way languages are taught at school means that the emphasis is generally on the one-to-one equivalence of words and phrases, since these are really the only things that can be effectively tested on paper. Unfortunately, languages as different as English and Japanese rarely have one-to-one equivalences in terms of the way words and phrases are used, not to mention the effect of cultural and social factors. What you have to learn to concentrate on is

listening very carefully to what people actually say, and make it part of your own vocabulary. This is another reason why you should be glued to the kind of topical TV programmes I mentioned earlier. You should do everything you can to expand your database of phrases that are actually used by politicians, academics, businessmen, scientists, sportsmen and all the other types of people that you might end up interpreting for, not just so that you can understand them, but so that you can use their language when you are speaking to them, and avoid using awkward or unnatural phrases that you have simply translated in your head.

The heart of any good course in interpreting should be about developing what used to be called lateral thinking – the ability to come up quickly with creative solutions to problems that defy conventional logic. The key point here is that interpreting is not really about words at all – it is about what is intended by the words that are spoken. That may seem like sophistry, but my point is that when we speak we do so only to express something that actually exists independently of the words, a feeling, perception or insight that first occurs to us in what the psycholinguist Steven Pinker refers to as ‘mentalese’ in his excellent book ‘The Language Instinct’. People often ask me whether I think in English or Japanese when I am speaking, but the truth of the matter is that we don’t actually think in either – we have what has also been referred to as ‘de-verbalised’ feelings that we use language to label and tag so that we can communicate them – either to ourselves or others – but it is the pre-verbal moment of understanding that comes first. In a very real sense, language is only a kind of code or programming, which is highly useful as a tool, but has no other significance. Those of us who speak two or more languages are in a very lucky situation because we actually have the opportunity to see and understand this, whereas monolingual speakers tend to become more irrationally attached to what they think of as the ‘special’ qualities of whatever language they speak.

As interpreters, we have to learn to detach ourselves from the words and listen to what is meant, to identify with the original feeling, the mentalese, that lies behind it. Once you can do that, then the interpreting problem becomes much easier. Instead of racking your brains for the correct way to say a particular phrase, you tune in to the feeling behind it, and simply express that feeling in whatever comes naturally in the other language – even if the actual words you use are actually quite different.



This is the key to really fluent, natural interpreting, and is especially important in simultaneous interpreting where you don't have time or memory capacity to get bogged down in the words – you can hold larger chunks of meaning as a feeling construct in mentalese.

The other reason that interpreting should go beyond just words is that language is only half of the equation in human communication. The other half, and in some ways the more important half, is our culture, our way of doing things, the accumulated habits, historical prejudices and illogical customs that make up our sense of community. The importance of this thing we call culture can be seen quite clearly even within the same language community, either inside one country when you visit another region, or – and particularly for English speakers – when you go to another country that speaks your language. For example, although I am a native English speaker, born and brought up in the UK, I used to feel more uncomfortable and out of place in the United States than I did in Tokyo because I was not used to American culture, whereas after 8 years of living in Japan I felt quite comfortable with Japanese culture even though Japanese is not my native language. Culture is about knowing what to do and what to say in a particular situation – in other words, understanding what 'normal' behaviour is. Just because you speak the language does not necessarily mean you are familiar with the culture – if an American I do not know comes up to me and says 'Hi, how are you?', I still look round to see if there is someone else he is talking to because in England you generally only say 'How are you?' to someone you know.

Obviously the culture gap between two different languages is that much greater, and as an interpreter you have to be sensitive to that as well. It is not enough to be merely bilingual – to be a good interpreter you have to be bicultural, which means that your aim must be to fit in as much as you can, to behave as 'normally' as possible within the context of the culture you are working in. This is particularly true for formal situations, where the culture of culture is particularly strong. For example, when a Japanese speaker gets up to speak, they usually announce their name, even though they have already been introduced. British speakers in the same situation usually do not. If as an interpreter you literally interpret what the speaker has said and say his name, it will sound very odd, not to say stupid, to a British audience. But

it does not sound odd or stupid to a Japanese audience – it is just a different custom. Your job as an interpreter is to interpret the speaker in such a way that what he or she says does not sound odd – unless they are deliberately saying something odd, or funny, in which case you have to make sure that the oddness or funniness is conveyed. In Muramatsu-san's book that I referred to earlier, he recounts an incident where an interpreter was unable to interpret a joke that a speaker had made, but asked the audience to laugh anyway because the speaker had just made a joke. That's probably taking it a bit far, but if the speaker has made a funny remark, he will begin to doubt your abilities as an interpreter if the audience does not respond.

My emphasis on the need to be bicultural really goes back to an earlier point I made about avoiding potential stereotypes. One thing you will very quickly become used to working as an interpreter between Japanese and English is that very many English-speaking people still seem to believe that 'Orientals' are hard to understand, do not express their emotions, and are generally 'inscrutable'. It is also true that many Japanese business people find themselves irritated with the apparent inability of 'westerners' to buckle down and do a job in an efficient and professional manner. I shall not attempt to pass judgement on the validity of these opinions except to say that as someone who has spent much time in Japan, I am well aware that Japanese people are as emotional – not to say as inefficient in their own way – as anyone else; it's just that they express it differently. I spend a great deal of my professional life trying to get people to see through these prejudices, which are only reinforced by linguistic miscommunication.

One of the greatest services you can do for your culture as potential interpreters is to really commit yourself to breaking down those stereotypes, which means, ultimately, being able, not so much to let go of as to rise above your own culture, so that you can function transparently in the other culture as the need arises. When I speak Japanese, I have to learn to contract myself, to shut down and attenuate my emotional responses to conform to the Japanese pattern of normality. When you speak English, you have to learn to open up, to express and amplify the emotional responses to conform to the English pattern. It is a mind-set, pure and simple: you just have to dig down to the mentalese, and pull the switch inside you. Ultimately, though, what it really takes is a recognition, or at least the effort to believe, that

beyond and before being Japanese, English or anything else, we are all actually human, a fact that should unite us far more than our culture and language separates us. We are all the same in the very fact that we have culture and language: it is our defining characteristic as humans. Sadly, the historical evolution of the mechanical codes with which we express our universal human mentalese has meant that the different forms have tended to be taken as defining our differences, but as we stand teetering on the edge of a new global society, we now know, even if we do not yet always fully feel, that this is not the case. As interpreters you can actually make a real difference to people's perception of this whole issue, which is why I would encourage you to take as your other motto the memorable words of E M Forster: 'Only connect'. That is the least, if perhaps also the most, that we can ask of ourselves.